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**Agnes Martin: painting as making and its relation to  
contemporary practice**

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

University of the Arts London

Chelsea College of Arts

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## **Abstract**

Can nuances of surface – by drawing the viewer close – offer contemplative experience, and enable art-making methods to be better understood? I investigate Agnes Martin's methods, which are available to those looking carefully at her paintings, focusing on the late 1950s and early 60s. Her constructions of materials found near her New York studio have received little critical attention in existing writing, despite their pivotal role in the development of her grid paintings. I re-enacted some of her methods, and adopted some of the elements that I observed in her artworks from this period, in order to better understand the relationship between found objects in these works and the marks and lines within later paintings and drawings. I focused on the particular quality of attention Martin devoted to marks, materials and surfaces, both in her work and in her working environment; this involved analysing and attempting to follow her 'contemplative' approach (see Chapter 2)

A practical analysis extended the understanding of Martin's methods and the effects of local North American influences, and resulted in a new body of layered and two-sided artworks, described throughout this thesis. This investigation of her meditative methods and how the field of painting can include objects and sculpture relates for the first-time Martin's attitude toward making with some artists who are working today (see Chapters 7 and 8). It also adds to existing scholarship on Martin by comparing her surfaces' demand for closeness (see Chapter 9) with the participatory practices of Lygia Clark and Gego in South America (see Chapter 10). Mondrian's influence is thereby traced in separate but parallel lines of abstraction.

This thesis' main contribution is a new workshop methodology (see Chapter 12) as a guide for those who wish to research an artist and their methods. The methodology offers a discursive structure within which to investigate art practice through new practice. The presentation of new artworks in participatory workshops in an exhibition setting invites discussion about art-making methods, emphasising the role of practice in the artistic research process. New artworks were offered to be hand-held by the viewer, and this invitation to attend closely was accompanied by art-making and dialogue around practice. The responses I gathered from participants indicate that this type of active engagement can disseminate tacit knowledge and offer experience of a contemplative approach.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Agnes Martin’s methods re-enacted through my practice**

Some existing writing on Agnes Martin, including that of Barbara Haskell (1992) and Briony Fer (2004) has argued that the materiality of Martin’s paintings invites contemplation, and that the surfaces are also evidence of a meditative approach to art-making. Fer wrote ‘It is a surface that invites a contemplative gaze, bolting the viewer to it, as if the *work* of the work were to open on to an immaterial and meditative space’ (2004:47). Haskell noted that Martin used geometry to focus attentiveness and awareness (1992:102). My practical research is a dialogue with Martin’s body of work; an analysis of a contemplative practice where her paintings invite a close engagement to examine nuanced tonalities and subtle plays in the materiality of the work. Through practice, I seek to discover how small irregularities of mark, surface and tone can offer contemplative experience, and how subtle ‘imperfections’ might enable art-making methods to be better understood by the spectator.

When I examined Martin’s artworks and methods through my own practice I started with my existing understanding of painting. Experimentation in which I re-enacted her methods produced surprising results (shown in ‘Notes from my practice’ at the end of each chapter) and an expanded practical knowledge. I wanted to find a new way to present these new artworks, as they required a different form of display from my earlier wall-mounted paintings. I also wanted to find how I could share practical knowledge from my research with others in the field of contemporary art practice. To do this I devised a methodology which other art researchers could also use.

This methodology is a guide to find new practical knowledge from the re-enactment of an earlier artist’s methods by means of experimental making. It also requires a direct form of presentation to invite dialogue about art practice. I describe this as a ‘workshop methodology’, and the steps are introduced in the second part of this chapter (1.2) and given in an expanded form in Chapter 12. Workshop methodologies can be used for a wide range of purposes in different contexts (Internet: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/training-and-technical-assistance/workshops/main>), but an important



reason for using this type of methodology in my research is to encourage focused discussion and art-making by inviting artists and researchers to handle my artworks.

Martin’s artistic practice of the late fifties and early sixties encompassed methods that are between painting and sculpture, thereby contributing to our understanding of the field of painting as a practice that extends out toward other disciplines. My curiosity about her practice as an active form of making led me to discover how her art-making methods can be used in a present-day context to produce new work. Stephen Melville described the complexity of exhibiting certain types of artwork *as* painting. He wrote that such artworks, which are at the limits of painting, can behave in ways that we do not expect, or can escape the usual understanding of what painting is, to explore different possibilities (Melville, in Armstrong et al, 2001:3). In my experimentation, I re-enact Martin’s use of materials that she found near her studio in the seaport area of Coenties Slip, a former harbour area for wooden sailing ships at the southern tip of Manhattan, New York. Examples of my new artworks are given in each chapter, so that practice remains central throughout this thesis. Martin’s constructions, made in a short period between 1958 and 1963, have received little critical attention, but I claim that they hold the key to the development of her grid paintings (see Chapter 3).

Martin’s first grid paintings have real physical depth, with rows of nails through the surface of the canvas, and emerged out of her experimentation with sculptural constructions. *Little Sister* (fig.1, page 3) was one of several similar small paintings produced in the early 1960s. When an untitled painting like *Little Sister*, also from 1962, was exhibited in the exhibition *As Painting: Division and Displacement* in 2001, Philip Armstrong drew attention to the way the brass nails evidence ‘the support’s real thickness’, and that the nails open the surface to ‘the space of a between’ (2001:135). The notion of actual rather than illusory depth is key in the development of my new practice, and instances are shown throughout my thesis as the layering of materials, puncture holes through surfaces and two-sided works.

Martin wrote that responses to her work were dependent upon ‘the condition of the observer’ (Martin, in Schwarz ed. 1991:18). I investigated the experience the viewer has when encountering Martin’s artworks (see Chapters 5 and 9), but also found another context in which to consider the artwork and spectator relationship when I contrasted

Martin with other artists contemporaneous to her, including Lygia Clark, a Neoconcrete artist in Brazil, and Gego in Venezuela (Chapter 10). In their work, the viewer has a participatory role, and this discovery was key in informing the presentation of my new artworks and the development of my workshop methodology.

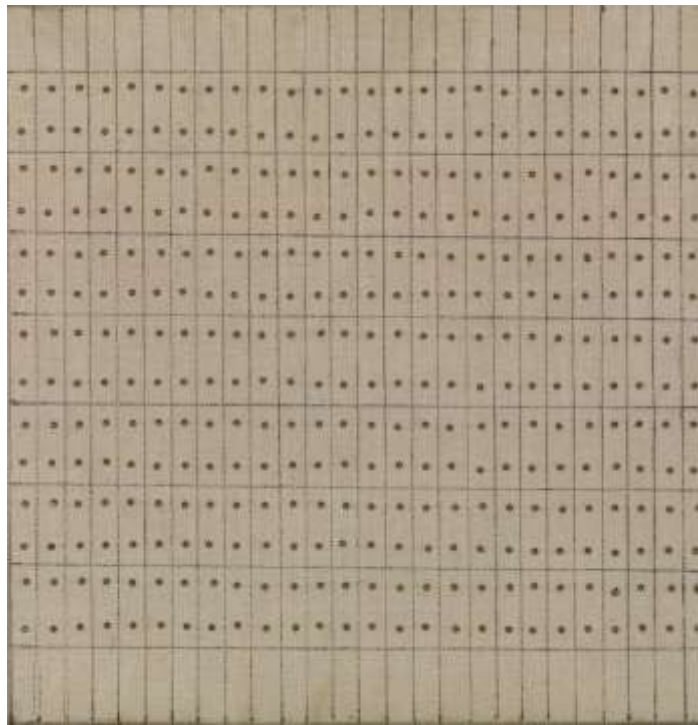


Fig.1 Agnes Martin, *Little Sister* (1962) Oil, ink, and brass nails on canvas and wood. (25.1 x 24.6 cm) Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Andrew Powie Fuller and Geraldine Spreckels Fuller Collection, 1999 © 2016 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

To further consider how a meditative approach to art-making might co-exist with a careful study of a work’s materiality, I offer two examples of writing by John Berger (below), where his careful observations of daily life are analogous to the way we might look at a painting. Berger [1980] (2009) described a mindful state in which small incidents are studied. He trained as a painter before his career in writing, and his detailed accounts of everyday events may also be a means to poetically convey slight changes of tone and marks. In his essay, *Field (About Looking)* [1980] 2009:199), Berger pointed out that when we are temporarily required to slow down or stop our activities,

we have a heightened awareness of the slightest incidents and sensations. In a narrative that centres on a field of grass, he chooses a route home that passes over a level crossing. While stopped at the crossing there is a field enclosed by trees on two sides in the angle between the railway line and the road. In the time-frame that he is required to wait he observes a chain of small events.

The events which take place in the field – two birds chasing one another, a cloud crossing the sun and changing the colour of the green – acquire a special significance because they occur during the minute or two during which I am obliged to wait. It is as though these minutes fill a certain area of time which exactly fits the spatial area of the field. Time and space conjoin. (Berger [1980] 2009:200)

Since we may choose our own field for such observations, he gives a list of requirements for ideal viewing and likens the conditions to those of a painting; defined edges and an openness to events ([1980] 2009:201-202). This poetic narrative describes what I have discovered to be my experience of looking at Martin's paintings; a contemplative and careful observation of her application of marks and subtle nuances of surface. In another essay titled *On Visibility* written in 1977, Berger wrote of an exercise on attentive looking that is akin to a meditative or mindful state of awareness. Here the grid of the window that he describes is softened and distorted by changing light. It begins:

Look: White transparent curtains across the window. Light coming from the right. Shadows of folds, hanging folds, darker than clouds. Suddenly sunlight. The window frames now cast shadows across the curtains. The shadows are convoluted following the folds: the window frames are straight and rectangular. Between the curtains and the window: a space like the lines on which music is written: but three-dimensional, and the notes of light rather than sound. The space between the rectangular window frames and their shadows convoluted because the curtains hang in folds half-transparently... (Berger, in *Vanishing Landscapes*, Nadine Barth and Uta Grosenick, ed. 2008:12-13)

I am drawing attention to Berger's writing because in these texts I observe there to be active awareness, which was advocated in Taoism and in Zen Buddhist philosophy; a still and focused mind-state that Martin adopted when she painted. Once in New York, meditative thinking prompted Martin's transition towards painting geometric forms,

repetitive marks and grids that offered tranquil experience. In Chapter 2.1, I write about the influences of East-Asian thought and how certain Buddhist texts became popular among many artists in New York. I investigate the application of Taoist thought in conjunction with Martin’s creative practice. Martin supported her art-making with meditation practice, and was also aware of a similarity between her grids and yantras, which are Tantric diagrams used as a focus for meditation (see Chapter 2.4). I discovered that concentrated thought given to art-making could provide meditative focus. At the end of Chapter 2.4, I write about contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco, who inscribes circular forms onto a variety of materials as an ‘exercise’ or aid for meditative thought.

Martin meditated on ‘beauty’, ‘happiness’ and ‘perfection’ (see pages 83-84), and her later paintings explored the theme of ‘love’ in a universal rather than romantic sense (*Agnes Martin: with my back to the world* [DVD] Mary Lance, 2003). Images in her mind were set down in a systematic way as measured grid compositions and geometric forms, but were also delicately executed. Barbara Haskell interpreted Martin’s perception of emotion as ‘flashes of awareness’ which occur in an ‘intuitional sphere’ or the ‘inner mind’. Martin held the view that the ‘outer mind’ compares and classifies, producing hierarchies where intellect hinders awareness (Haskell, 1992:94-95). In condemning ‘intellect’, Martin wrote: ‘The idea – the sudden realisation of the destruction of innocence by ego’, and further ‘In solitude there is consolation, thinking of others and myself, even plants’. She continued with a statement that shows perhaps a non-material or even a spiritual perception of reality: ‘There is this other thing going on – the purification of reality that is all that is happening – all that happens is that process – not nature, the dissolution of nature. The error is in thinking we have a part to play in that process’ (Martin, *The Untroubled Mind*, in Schwarz ed. 1991:43) (see Chapter 5: grid paintings, dissolution of form, and their relation to nature). Despite my continued resistance to the meditative nature and emotional content of her practice, it was apparent that her contemplative approach could not be ignored.

When I began my research my intention at first was to focus on the materiality of Martin’s paintings to interpret her practical methods. Through discussion at supervision meetings it became increasingly clear that my avoidance of the possibilities offered by meditative thought in relation to art-making prevented some insights and provided a

distorted reading of her practice. This realisation was an important turning point in my thinking and had a significant impact on my practice. My new artworks reflect this change, so that my first experimentation with packaging materials tended towards materiality and finding new art-making methods. After this, when I used carefully selected antique book covers and paper as supports, there is a transition towards more meditative methods. I began to build on a vocabulary of marks, but increasingly developed an attentive attitude to making (see Chapter 2). My re-enactment of Martin’s art-making employs this meditative form, rather than the more anticipated analytical style for a PhD thesis. This is because I followed my intention to mirror her approach and the invitation to closeness that I experienced with her paintings.

The re-enactment of an earlier artist’s practice may seem unusual, but I have discovered that new practical knowledge can be found by investigating the methods of an earlier artist through practice in a contemporary context. When I considered how a written text might parallel a practical study, I was informed by reading Dan Hays’ practice-led research in painting, *Screen as Landscape* (Kingston University, London, 2012). His written text is laid out as a landscape with divergent paths. There are clearings or pauses for thought, so that the meaning of the title is revealed in a cumulative process by gathering information from different locations. Hays’ thesis gives an insight into how the subject of research can be mirrored by written text. I decided to adopt a similar approach in my thesis, but through written descriptions of practice that run parallel to the main text.

My inquiry was prompted by careful observation of my paintings (fig.2), which were compositions of evenly spaced marks. The repeated blocks of colour represented my experiences of landscape and light around my studio between 2004 and 2005 on a former Ministry of Defence site in a rural area of Hampshire. In the curved openness of the surrounding fields I was aware of instances of measurement and interval: electric pylons connected with loosely stretched wires, muddy tyre tracks and furrows across the fields where crops were planted. Since my studio in this derelict industrial building had only a skylight but no windows, my paintings were a synthesis of remembered impressions from my journeys to the studio rather than representations of a particular view. When

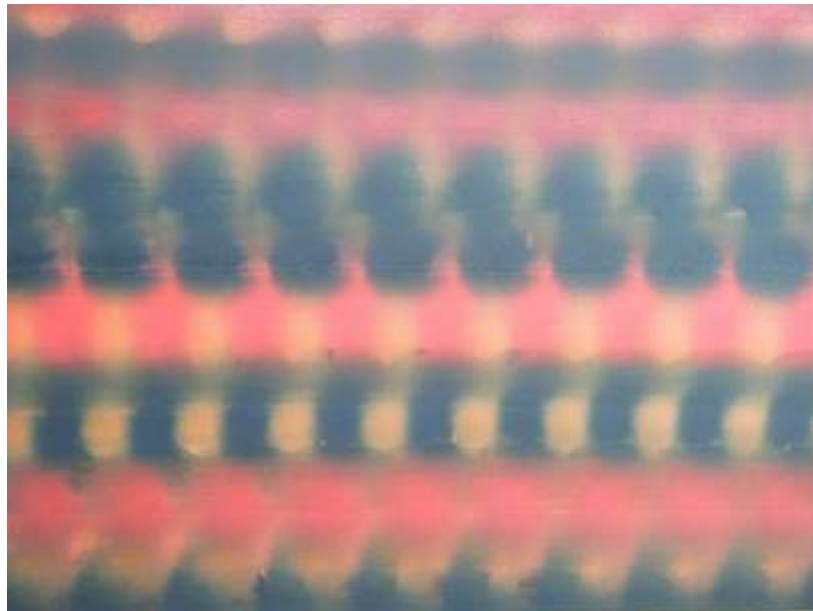
enclosed in that space, there was a minimum amount of distraction from the outside world.

I used a method where layers of thinned oil paint in a single colour were first brushed onto canvas primed with gesso, then dabs of paint were applied horizontally across the surface with a rubber roller. Uneven distribution of paint created ‘imperfections’; small flecks appeared whenever the roller passed over tiny protruding tufts in the weave of the canvas. The edges of the roller created lines through the paint, which varied depending upon the pressure I applied. These had a found quality, being an unintentional result left by the method of mark-making, but I repeated them free-hand by deliberately scoring through the paint with a pointed implement. The scored lines followed the path of the accidental lines, but were slightly curved because they were made without a guiding ruler or other straight edge. My reluctance to edit out signs of making was influential in the formulation of my inquiry, because it seemed important that painting should be seen to be an active process of making and not only as a finished product.

Surfaces blurred because of the movement of the roller spreading the paint, and they were also smoothed with a wide flat brush. Although there is an impression of symmetry, this is never perfectly attained. I was aware of both concealing and revealing areas of paint and layered marks. The painting process required my surfaces to be laid flat on the floor, because if the canvases were painted upright on a wall the rollers could slip or the paint would run, so that orientation was decided later. These points are significant because they develop in my new practical work when I investigate imperfect symmetry (see Chapter 4.2, fig.51), and layering that can both reveal and conceal marks. I also produce artworks (shown throughout this thesis) which the viewer can manipulate into different viewing positions.

Facing page:

Fig.2 *Afterimage (Red)* (2008) oil on canvas, 91.5 x 61cm. Painting and photograph by Sharon Phelps



When I received notice that the rundown buildings were to be demolished, I relocated to a former dairy, then to a wood workshop, both on farmland. In each studio, the fabric of the building was exposed. Corrugated roofs, unpainted block walls, concrete floors, timber ceilings and partitions, cables and pipework held in place by clips; all gave the buildings a sense that their construction was openly displayed. In a similar way to my examination of Martin’s paintings, I observed how each element was held in place or supported. This awareness had a subtle effect on my art-making; evidence of making was left purposely exposed, with my artworks being presented in a provisional state without ‘tidying up’ or obvious ‘finish’. I felt curious about the degree to which the construction of Martin’s surroundings might have seeped into her art-making. Could she have been influenced by the industrial buildings of the seaport area around her studio in New York, where she spent the years between 1957 and 1967? (see Chapter 3). How did this contrast with studios in New Mexico, which she constructed using a traditional method of wood poles and adobe (a mix of clay-rich earth and straw)? (see Chapter 4.1).

Martin lived and worked in New Mexico both before and after her ten-year spell in New York. Gallerist Betty Parsons visited Martin in Taos, New Mexico, in 1957 with Japanese-American artist Kenzo Okada (Haskell, 1992:100). Okada had introduced a meditative sensibility to Abstract Expressionist painting, with soft-edged blocks of pale earth-tones that were quiet evocations of landscape. Parsons invited Martin to exhibit her paintings in her Manhattan gallery, provided that she relocated to New York, and she supported Martin when she first arrived at Coenties Slip in 1957. My curiosity led me to visit both areas of North America, looking at the buildings and their surroundings. My visit to the region of northern New Mexico around Taos, Albuquerque and Santa Fe also made me aware that there could be connections between Martin’s paintings, the landscape and traditional Navajo designs (see Chapter 4.2).

Martin denied that her geometric paintings represented landscape, but acknowledged that we could experience moments of contemplation from both, stating: ‘It is to accept the necessity of the simple direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean’ (Martin, in Schwarz ed. 1991:7). Arne Glimcher, who was Martin’s gallerist at Pace, New York from 1974, confirmed that Martin’s paintings, while seeming to have a relation to the appearance of landscape are instead ‘states of mind’



representing ‘innocence’, ‘ecstasy’ and ‘joy’ (*Agnes Martin: Arne Glimcher in conversation with Frances Morris* at Tate, London, in April 2013). Yet, in her essay *The Untroubled Mind*, Martin also credited her use of horizontal lines to her experience of the plains of New Mexico. She described moving between the landscape ‘plain’ and the ‘plane’ of a horizontal line:

I used to paint mountains here in New Mexico and I thought my mountains looked like ant hills. I saw the plains driving out of New Mexico and I thought the plain had it – just the plane [...] When I draw horizontals you see this big plane and you have certain feelings like you’re expanding over the plane. Anything can be painted without representation (Martin, in Schwarz ed. 1991:37).

Art historian and critic Suzanne Hudson’s thesis is that Martin sought recourse to classical forms (line and geometry) rather than make direct references to nature because of a heightened awareness about environmental issues after the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962. Hudson wrote that Carson’s revelatory scientific study described the devastating effects on human life and other living organisms with the widespread application of the chemical DDT. Nature was then presented in political terms, as being under threat from man-made contamination, and could not be understood in a pure or romantic sense (Hudson, *Agnes Martin, On a Clear Day*, in Cooke et al ed. 2011:119-131).

My understanding of Martin’s process of transcription from landscape to abstract marks is based on a painter’s understanding rather than critical interpretation. In my practice, observations of landscape around the studio were represented in my paintings by evenly placed marks. Although an initial vocabulary of marks was established, this was later developed and extended in this research, and the experience was internalised. In this way, the paintings no longer directly reference observed scenes but are an equivalent of the absorbed sense of viewing.

I have outlined what prompted my inquiry and the significance of giving close attention to small events or ‘imperfections’. In the second part of this chapter (1.2) I write about my decision to conduct my research through practice and I introduce how this is done through my workshop methodology. This introduction leads into the main body of my

research, where I further investigate the meditative aspects of Martin’s practice before examining different contexts for her work. I also describe how I analysed her paintings through my practice, and how that new practice is presented to others.

## 1.2 A practice-led methodology

In this second part of my introduction I describe how presentations and discussions at conferences and symposia confirmed to me what can be gained by conducting research through practice. While my research originated in my own experiences of painting, presentations about the role of practice in artistic research, and related dialogue with others, further informed my decision-making. Several of these events were opportunities to present practice to other art researchers, and two such conferences are described in Chapter 11.1. These are:

- *Sensingsite: Transcribing Site*, a conference at the Parasol Unit, London, 19 May 2014
- *Interactions with the Real*, a conference at Royal Holloway University, London, 21 November 2015

On 26 April 2013, I participated in a one-day *Visual Symposium* at Beaconsfield, London, where the intention was to foreground practice in artistic research. Practice-led painting research students from across the United Kingdom were invited to bring an artwork to hang on the day, with time allowed for group discussions about their practice. Exhibited works included photographs, paintings and three-dimensional objects. At the symposium, we organised ourselves into groups according to different concepts or use of materials, and to respond to each other's artworks. I displayed a collage work, with looping lines inscribed into copper leaf and paper mounted on wood panel, and this is described in the notes on my practice in Chapter 8. A consensus among the practice-led researchers attending the symposium indicated that opportunities to foreground and share art practice in a research context do not arise often.

The exhibition of artworks and ensuing debate indicated that practice can be an important means to convey knowledge, in addition to verbal and written communication. The speakers Ian Kiaer, Beth Harland, Andrea Medjesi-Jones and Sadie Murdoch each gave a presentation describing the role of practice in their research, and discussion was chaired by painter and scholar David Ryan. The speakers explained how certain ideas had informed their practice, and spoke about some of the methods they

used to make work. They had been invited to exhibit some of their artworks, so that those attending the presentations could see actual examples of the artist's practice.

The event was initiated by Rebecca Fortnum, who made a study in 2005 of 'visual intelligence' (*What is visual intelligence and how do artists use it?* in *Inspiration to order*, 2006: 6-13). The Visual Intelligences Research Project (Internet: <http://www.visualintelligences.com/inspiration-to-order.html>) at The Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts sought to investigate the relation between thinking and making by examining artists' studio practices. Fortnum, a Research Fellow who worked on that project, foregrounded art practice as a form of rigorous inquiry which involves a 'series of decisions' (2006:6-8). She suggested that evidence of decision-making processes can be found in an artist's sketches or writings. In my research, I have examined many of Martin's artworks at first-hand and referred to her writings. However, I have also replicated the methods by which she made her work, and conducted an inquiry through practice. I did this in conjunction with my reading of related art historical, anthropological and technical research by others to examine possible influences on Martin's practice and to better understand her art-making methods.

A symposium organised by Nottingham Trent University on 21 - 22 January 2016 titled *Sense, Experiment, Surprise, Understanding* (see Chapter 11.1) had as its focus 'the challenges encountered by researchers-practitioners conducting and presenting research that involves creative practice'. Invited scholar Stephen Scrivener described how art research differs from other types of PhD research. His experiences of computing research prior to his entry into artistic practice and research led him to find that experimentation in the artistic field can be set up to generate surprise findings. He had encountered a failure of his earlier 'problem-solving research model' in an art school context, but found that 'works of creative production change beliefs about creative production' and that 'some creative production might be understood as research'. He concluded that artistic research shows 'a capacity to accept desirable surprises so that they might lead us to surprising creations', and proposed an art research model in which new work that arises from experimentation is analysed through a reflective process (Scrivener, *The Aesthetics of Research*, presentation at Nottingham Trent University, 21 January 2016).

My experiences at these symposia and conferences started a process of thinking about how I could gain a new understanding of art practice through practice, and this led me to devise a workshop methodology. The methodology that I have devised may provide a structure for future researchers to follow, in investigating earlier artists' methods through an evolving practice of their own. In my study, I describe a series of steps where new works are presented at first-hand to groups of artists and art researchers, and they are invited to give responses. I explain how I have used this methodology, inviting others to handle my artworks and engage in art-making with materials that I provide.

This workshop situation provides a space for dialogue about practice within a temporary gathering of people who are brought together by a measure of shared outlook on making and approaching art. Participants have either previously demonstrated an interest at seminars and discussions, or they are linked through their practice to the exhibition in which the workshop is organised. The workshop acts as a catalyst in which knowledge about art practice is stimulated and exchanged. I discovered that this direct form of presentation not only prompted focused discussion and disseminated practical knowledge, but also communicated experience of the contemplative approach I used in my study. The focused workshop is an alternative to a traditional seminar, offering a more active form of participation around art-making and dialogue. This workshop methodology is described in greater detail as a series of steps in Chapter 12.

The following chapter begins to document the main research activity of this thesis. While I have conducted my practical study by examining Martin's meditative approach, the main body of this research aims to provide a more general understanding of an artist's work through new making by the artist-researcher. The purpose for this is to evaluate the relevance of that artist to contemporary art practices now.

## Chapter 2: A contemplative practice

In this chapter I write about the meditative aspect of Martin's practice. I first describe the reception of Taoist thought and Zen Buddhism in New York, and the impact of these spiritual practices on artists in North America from the late 1950s. I consider how Martin used a meditative approach to make art, and why this approach remains important now. I examine the significance of the grid (the ordering structure used by Martin almost continually within her work) not only as a structure within Modernist practice but as a focus for meditative thought within other traditions. Some of Martin's early grids of the 1960s are compared with drawings made by textile artist Lenore Tawney, interpreting the grid drawings as a weave (figs 4-7). Later, in Chapter 4.2, this discussion is continued in my investigation of Navajo weave. Through my practice (figs 9-11), I attempt to adopt this meditative approach to re-enact the nuanced surfaces and weave-like lines that I have observed in Martin's paintings. I also write how Martin attempted to create 'perfect' lines, and describe how, for her, making grid paintings offered tranquillity. The final part of the chapter explores a similarity between Martin's grids and Tantric diagrams, which are also aids for meditative thought, and this is further examined through my artwork (fig.14).

Martin avoided what she called a 'go, go, go' attitude (*Agnes Martin: with my back to the world* [DVD] Lance 2003), preferring a contemplative approach to painting supported by her readings of Taoist thought and a daily meditation practice (Princenthal, 2015:104). The present-day 'Slow Movement' ([www.slowmovement.com](http://www.slowmovement.com)) advocates a shift toward spending the right amount of time on each activity, to take time for care and reflection, and to recover a sense of belonging. It is a worldwide movement of individuals who wish to practice what is often referred to as 'mindful awareness' in every aspect of life. There is a shared intention, which is that of restoring a sense of connectedness between people, family, community, culture, life and the planet. I interpret 'slowness', which Martin described as a 'soft approach' (*Agnes Martin* [DVD] Lance 2003), as concentrated thought and a state in which the mind is receptive to 'inspiration' while daily activity is stopped. Importantly, as I have set out to demonstrate with experiments within my own practice, this focused state of awareness can be available while engaged in attentive art-making.

## 2.1 The links between East-Asian philosophy and Agnes Martin's approach to her work

Although my research is not a study of Chinese philosophies, in this chapter I offer a brief outline of some of its tenets on calm and attentiveness. My purpose is to explain how some aspects of Chinese thought were adopted by Martin and how this may have informed her art-making. East-Asian philosophies interested many of Martin's contemporaries, but were received in a filtered form after they were introduced to Western intellectual circles from 1891, with some texts privileged above others. Taoist thought and its adaptations were mostly derived and translated from writings attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who is believed to have been born around the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC. This wisdom became popularised by translations of the *Tao Te Ching* (King, R. in Guggenheim 2009:38-39). The degree of influence of those spiritual beliefs was reflected by one hundred artists with diverse practices who were included in an exhibition *The Third Mind, American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 – 1989* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (30 January – 19 April 2009). John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Tobey, Georgia O'Keeffe and Morris Graves were just a few of the artists, who along with Martin contributed toward a total of two hundred and fifty works.

Martin believed that 'with a soft approach we receive more' (*Agnes Martin* [DVD] Lance, 2003). In Taoist philosophy, alert attention is maintained by remaining still and calm. In this tranquil state of absolute concentration and open acceptance, the practitioner can receive knowledge and experience creativity (Stokes, 2002:40-41). Martin's preference for waiting quietly until she received inspiration about what to paint would seem to indicate a closeness between her approach and that advised by advocates of Zen thought.

In the recent Guggenheim show, Martin was represented by two grid paintings, *Little Sister* (1962) (fig.1) and *White Stone* (1965), a grid painting in oil and graphite on linen in Martin's preferred six-feet square format. Curator Alexandra Munroe placed Martin in a group of artists with Reinhardt, in a category titled *Art of Perceptual Experience: Pure Abstraction and Ecstatic Minimalism*, which Munroe explained 'traces the new iteration of Asian rhetoric in American art of the 1960s that recasts the art object as a

focus of contemplation aimed at shifting the viewer's state of consciousness'. Martin's technique of making repetitive marks while in a state of quiet, focused concentration was described as a contributing factor to spiritual readings of her work (Munroe, in Guggenheim, 2009:32).

When interviewed by critic Joan Simon in May 1996, Martin described her relationship with Reinhardt as a supportive friendship, and said that they shared an admiration for each other's paintings (Simon, *Perfection is in the Mind*, 1996:85). He had studied Buddhist art, Chinese painting, Zen and Taoist philosophies (Munroe, in Guggenheim, 2009:32), and Martin was exposed to his thinking when she had a studio at Coenties Slip, between 1957 and 1967. Reinhardt did not have a studio at Coenties Slip, but his paintings were exhibited by Betty Parsons in New York between 1947 and 1965 (Princenthal, 2015:98), so that he encountered Martin when they were exhibited by the same gallery. Both artists made paintings of non-hierarchical forms, with slight contrasts and little differentiation of colour, that invite prolonged viewing. I write more about their shared concerns in Chapter 3, Coenties Slip.

D T Suzuki, a Japanese author of essays and books on Zen Buddhism, gave lectures at Columbia University between 1949 and 1951 which introduced many artists, including Reinhardt and John Cage, to Zen philosophy (Haskell, 1992:95). Zen spiritual thinking emphasised 'sense-experience' rather than intellect (Princenthal, 2015: 107). Cage prefaced a collection of his lectures and writings in a book titled *Silence* in June 1961 with a statement about his engagement with Zen, and wrote of the confusion this caused to critics of his work. His method of using chance was not agreeable to Martin, and she explained that chance still required some element of decision-making and, therefore, intellect. She wrote about this to Kathan Brown around 1980 at Crown Point Press:

Between you and me, Kathan, John Cage is still negative because although he has surrendered self direction to chance that does not make art work. He does not believe in inspiration, beauty, truth, reality but only chance. With chance one still must choose to act and he is back to intellect. Inspiration is possible when you say to yourself "I do not know what to do" and the answer comes to you. It is a command. If you ask for it you have to do it. It is the cause of effective action in this world and it is the path of life. Cage and others like him who move according to intellect are not on the path (Brown, Crown Point Press, Newsletter April 2012).



When interviewed by the critic and art historian Irving Sandler for a publication titled *You have to do what you have to do*, for Art Monthly in September 1993, Martin was asked if she was friendly with Cage. Martin replied ‘Well, just to speak to. But I don’t agree with him’. She disagreed with Cage’s statement that ‘there is no such thing as silence’, at the beginning of his book *Silence*. Martin explained that ‘When you walk into a forest there are all kinds of sounds but you feel as though you have stepped into silence. I believe that is silence’ (Bickers and Wilson ed. 2007:423).

In *Silence*, Cage gave a step-by-step account of a journey made with a friend from Seattle to a tiny island in Puget Sound. I mention this in relation to my earlier examples of Berger’s writing, which also show an awareness of small incidents (see pages 3 - 4). The description of Cage’s journey to the miniature island ends when he takes in the view across a stretch of water at Deception Pass, while lying on a bed of flowers which carpet the island. The reader is aware that he has seen a great deal, but he concluded by writing that while lying there, other people came across the footbridge onto the island, perturbed that they had come a long way and found nothing to see (1968, 2009:56). Martin and Cage each interpreted Zen philosophy differently, but in my practice, I have re-enacted what I understand to be Martin’s focused attentiveness to materials and art-making. By doing this I have also attempted to provide the sense of quiet in my new work that I have experienced in Martin’s artworks.

## 2.2 Weave

Martin is known to have formed an intimate relationship with Lenore Tawney shortly after arriving at Coenties Slip, and they lived in a community that, unusually for that time, was open to same-sex relationships (Katz, J. in Cooke et al ed. 2011:176). Tawney offered Martin emotional support (see page 166), and together with Ann Wilson, another friend and artist at Coenties Slip, studied the 16<sup>th</sup> Century writings of St Teresa of Avila, which described a quiet contemplative state offering detachment from the world (Princenthal, 2015: 102). Nancy Princenthal, who recently wrote Martin's biography, described that Martin and textile artist Tawney, who shared Martin's building, had an interest in mindfulness practices. Tawney made line drawings around 1964 in ink on graph paper (fig.7), and collages that incorporated images, texts and drawings on antique book pages, postcards and envelopes. It is her drawings rather than weave that Princenthal believes ties Tawney closely with Martin in a pursuit of meditative artistic practice (2015: 63-65, 117).



Fig. 3 Lenore Tawney at her studio in Coenties Slip in 1958. Tawney became known as an important textile artist who made woven sculptural forms. Photograph David Attie

Martin would have seen looms and the weaving process in Tawney's studio at Coenties Slip. There are resemblances between their works around that time, and to show examples of these similarities I have arranged images of paintings and drawings by Martin and Tawney adjacent to each other, below (Martin, figs 4 and 6, alongside Tawney figs 5 and 7).



Fig.4 Agnes Martin, *Untitled* (1959) Oil paint and ink on canvas, 30.5 x 30.5cm. Image: © 1959 Agnes Martin /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Photo by: Ellen Page Wilson

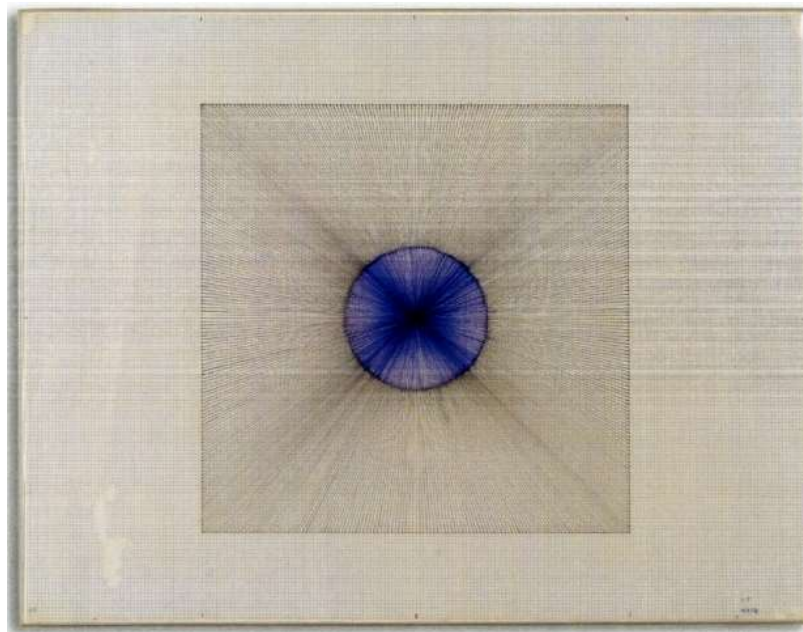


Fig.5 Lenore Tawney, *Blue Circle* (1964) India ink on graph paper, 43 x 56cm. Image: Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

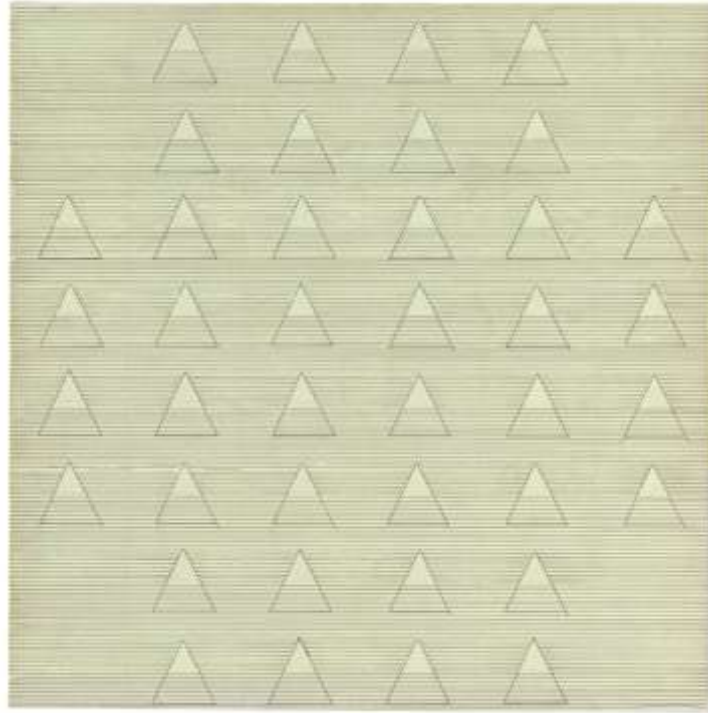


Fig.6 Agnes Martin, *Words* (1961) Ink on paper mounted on canvas, 62.2 x 62.2cm. Image: Thomas Ammann Fine Art AG, Zurich, © 2016 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo courtesy Thomas Ammann Fine Art



Fig.7 Lenore Tawney, *Union of Water and Fire II* (1964) India ink on graph paper, 58.5 x 46cm. Image: Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

Despite Martin's denial that there was any influence of weaving on her paintings (Simon, 1996:88-89), Haskell wrote in an essay to accompany a major exhibition of Martin's paintings at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in 1992, that Martin's grids may have been a response to Tawney's weaves. She described that pencil lines drawn across a canvas were 'like strings of yarn pulled across a loom' (Haskell, 1992:105). Martin's eight-inch square ink drawing *Untitled (White Flower)* (1961), shown below in fig.8, gives credence to that idea. The work on paper has stitch-like marks which are hand-drawn in ink.

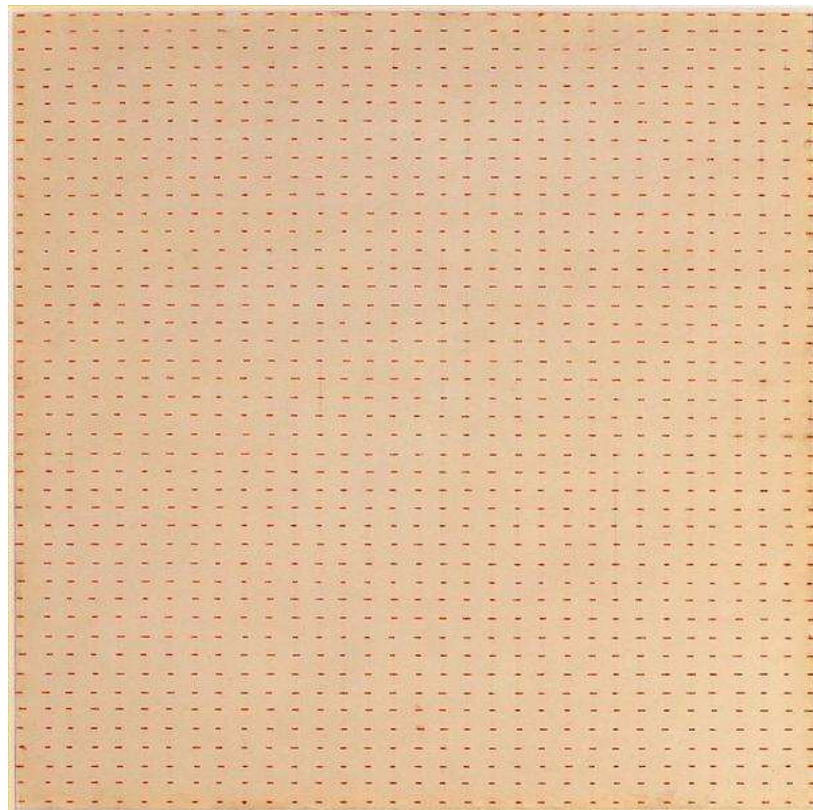


Fig. 8 Agnes Martin, *Untitled (White Flower)* (1961) red ink on paper, 20.3 x 20.3 cm, Image: [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org) ©Agnes Martin

### Notes from my practice

I started a series of new works (an example is shown in figs. 9-11), which involved the physical reassembly of old book covers. I re-interpreted Martin's grids in relation to woven thread lines I had observed within some of the book covers. Red stitch-like pencilled lines connecting paired graphite dot marks echo the choice of colour for the 'threads' or stitch-like marks on Martin's drawing *Untitled (White Flower)* (1961), shown in fig. 8. Blocks of red colour can be seen in old traditional Navajo weaves which are widely displayed in museums and stores around Taos, where Martin lived in New Mexico (see Chapter 4.2, New Mexico).

I was told anecdotally by a weaver when I visited Taos that the colour originated from when Navajo women used thread that they had unravelled from soldiers' clothing. This was in 1864 when Navajo people were captured by soldiers of the United States government and endured a 300 mile walk to an internment camp at Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner, with hundreds dying on the way. The memory of this walk from their homeland, in what is now Arizona, to Eastern New Mexico is passed down through generations of Navajo, and remembered in the weaves that were made at Bosque Redondo during captivity, when it was difficult to find thread.

This historical narrative and the abundance of weave in stores, craft workrooms and museums around Taos and Santa Fe, led me to consider whether there could have been subtle influences on Martin from local storytelling and through encounters with Native American

weave. I responded to these questions about weave by making an artwork where there is a partial single row of puncture holes along the top edge, and two rows of puncture holes along the lower edge, passing through the top layer of paper (fig.9), which is folded up in the second view (fig.10) into the book cover beneath. These holes indicate physical depth into the support, as with Martin's grid paintings that were pierced with nails, like *Little Sister* (fig.1). The lines of holes in my artwork also repeat the stitching holes in book-binding. Before using book covers, I experimented with puncture holes in packaging materials, and that earlier work is shown in figs 83 – 84, page 149. I also used dots or puncture holes to mirror the points of attachment between sections of weave and the frame of a loom. This reading of the grid as a weave within the frame of a loom is important when I examine a painting by Martin titled *The Islands* (1961), shown later in fig. 48 and this is discussed on page 85, in Chapter 4.2, New Mexico – Navajo weave.

The paper in the book cover that I selected for my artwork has darkened from ageing, and there are pre-existent marks from its earlier use. The importance of incorporating found marks is made clear in Chapter 3, when I write about Martin's experimentation with materials that she found in the area around her studio at Coenties Slip. The fold in the top sheet of paper is where the flap can be lifted by the viewer to look underneath, inviting spectator participation (see Chapter 10). The person holding the work can observe real depth, smell the musty odour of the paper and experience tactility by touching the grain of the different surfaces. The book cover artworks offer 'sense-experience'

(see page 17), going beyond the usual visual experience of a painting. Pencil marks along the side edges are visible, having been retained as evidence of measuring out and making. On the other side of the artwork, the blue cover (fig.11) has the book's original embossed design, but the outer margin has been lightly filled in with white pencil emphasising the border as a frame, like that of a loom.

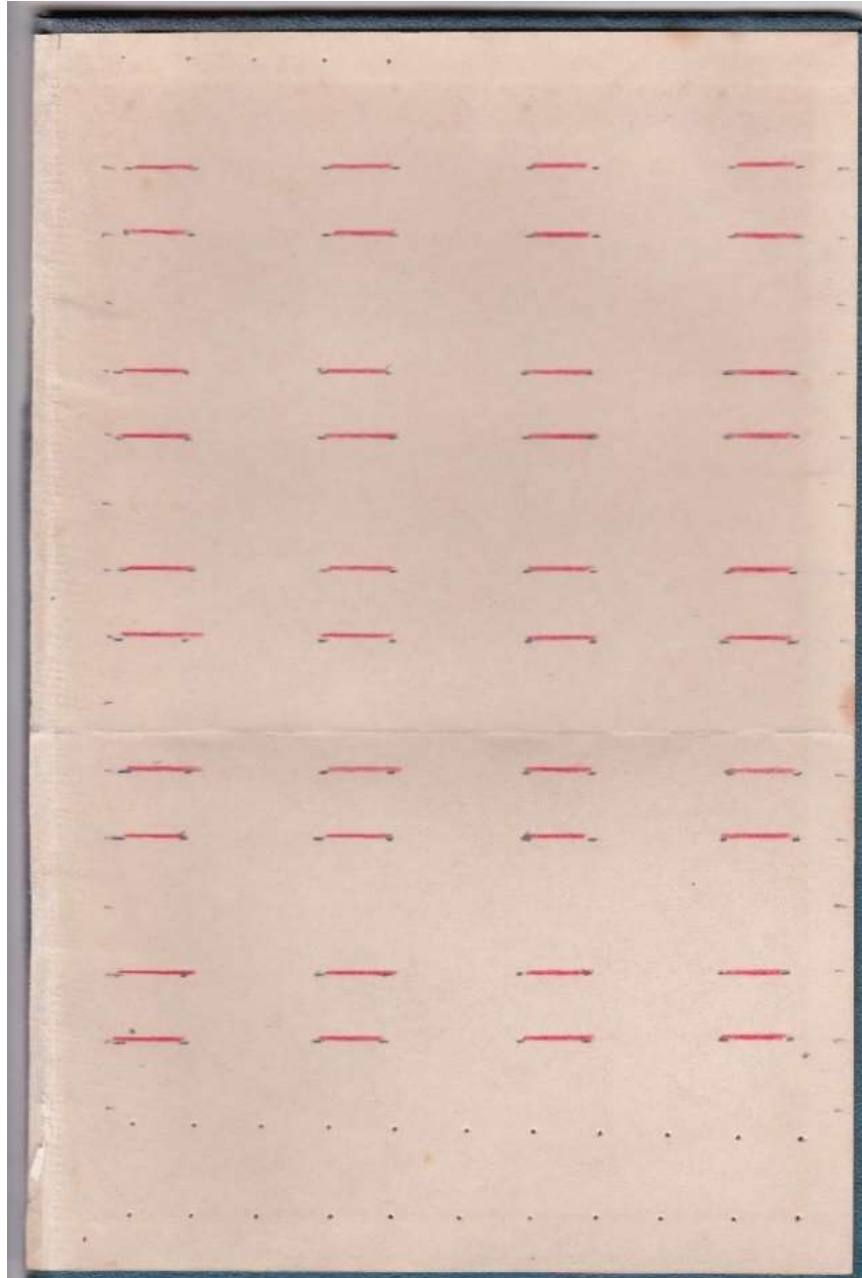
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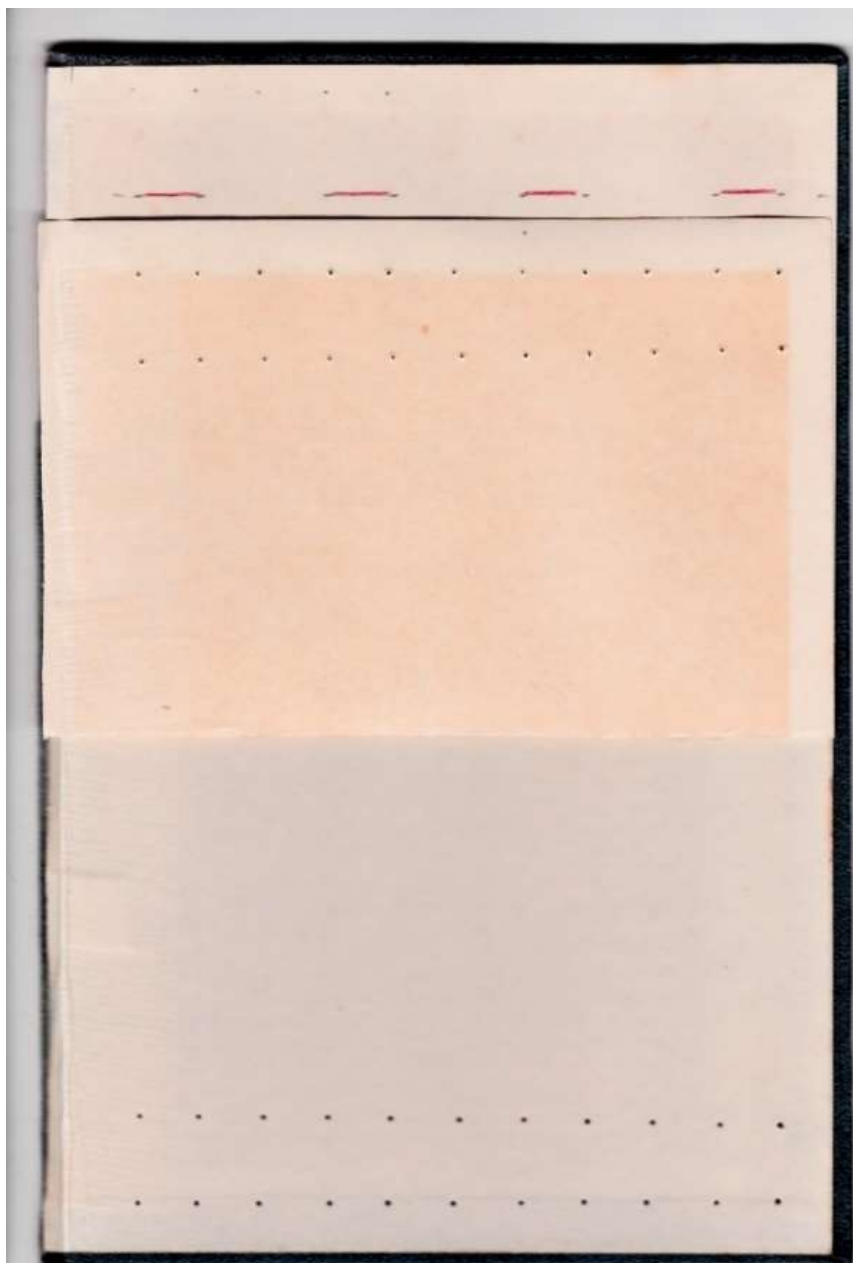
Fig.9 *Untitled* (2015) 19 x 12.5cm. Grid drawing with pencil 'stitches' on paper and book cover. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps (View 1)

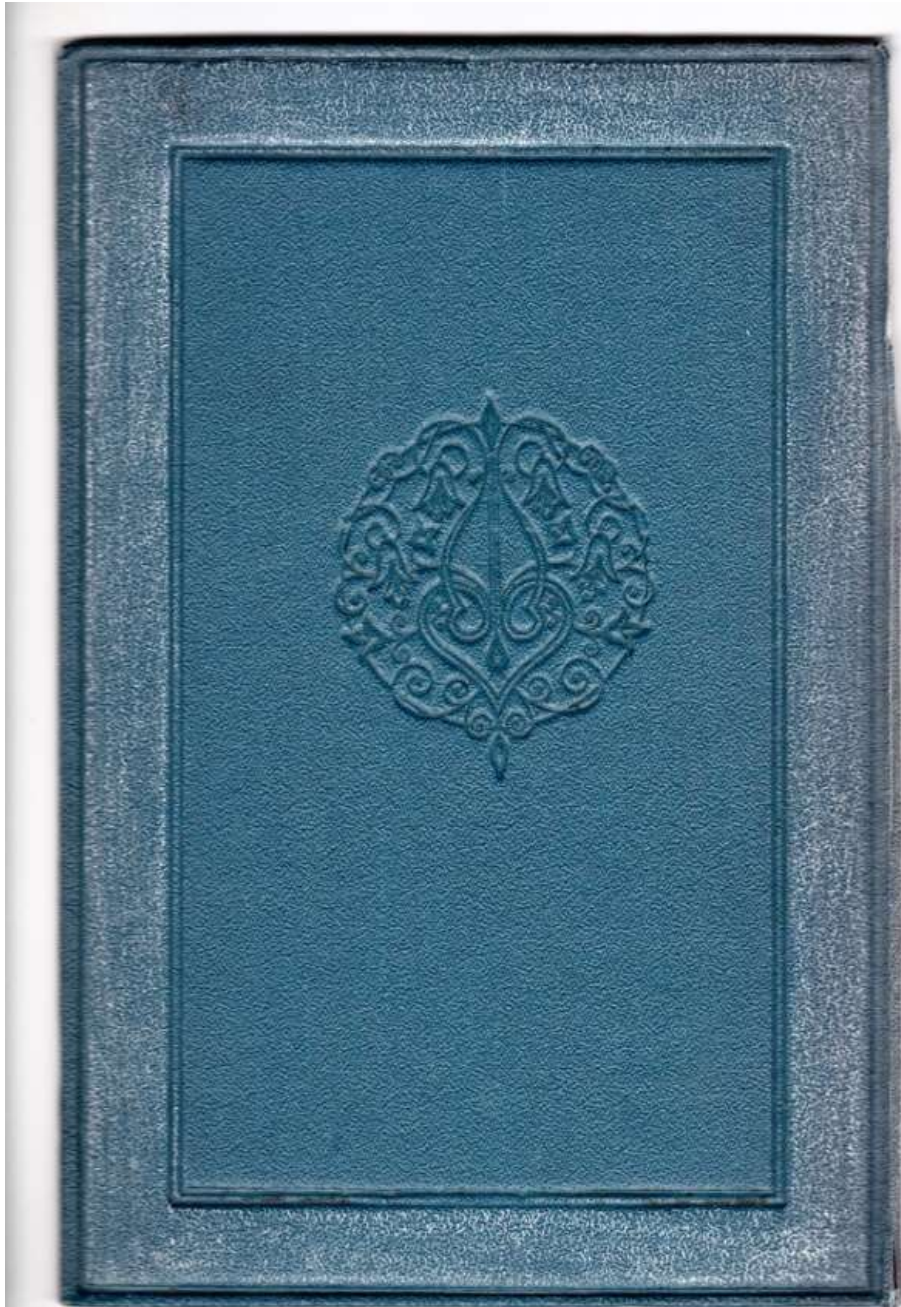
Fig.10 The same artwork with the lower section of paper folded up, so that puncture holes can be seen through the paper and into the book cover when a viewer handles the artwork. (View 2)

Fig.11 The original embossed outer cover on the same artwork, with white pencil lightly shaded within the border to emphasise the 'frame'. (View 3)









Rosalind Krauss wrote that artists who adopt the grid, like Martin, Mondrian, Albers and Reinhardt, become involved in repetition. Krauss insisted, although I will question this, that the grid ‘follows’ and ‘doubles’ the woven canvas, and ‘veils’ the surface through repetition (1986:160-161). When Martin made these weave-like artworks in New York, she had only recently relocated from New Mexico. This led me to understand that a connection to weave can also be traced through a likeness of her forms (fig.6) to mesas, which are flat-topped mountains in northern New Mexico. Stepped designs that reference mesas were incorporated into traditional Navajo weave and ceramics, and these designs can be seen in museums in that area. This is discussed later, in relation to Martin’s practice and my visit to New Mexico (Chapter 4.2 New Mexico – Navajo weave). A similarity to Navajo weave provides an interpretation of Martin’s lines that is more connected to her life than the replication of the woven canvas surface suggested by Krauss. Instead, the grid is a transcription of a woven artefact onto a flat surface.

When I wrote about my artwork in this chapter (figs. 9-11), I explained its relation to weave and meditative practice in a direct way. Before making this work, I needed to spend some time carefully looking at actual examples of weave (Chapter 4.2), as well as observing Martin’s paintings in detail (see Chapter 6). While thinking about different types of weave through my practice, I observed that when an old book is cut open and peeled apart, there is webbing layered between the cloth and paper, and that there are loose threads along the cut edge. My experimentation with materials suggested that weave could also be a layer between the surfaces of a support. Where paper was glued over the webbing by the bookbinder and flattened, some areas of weave are visible as impressions. I also found rows of stitching that bind the pages together. These other types of weave and stitch have informed my practice so that weave can be re-enacted in different ways.

### 2.3 Perfect line and the grid

Having achieved recognition for her paintings in New York, Martin stopped painting in 1967, and left after she had received notice that her studio building was to be demolished. She did not paint again until 1973. In a film made by Mary Lance, when Martin was in her eighties, Martin described travelling for two years in a camper van before returning to New Mexico and eventually building a home and studio (*Agnes Martin, with my back to the world* [DVD] Lance, 2003). During that time her existing paintings continued to be exhibited.

She began a series of thirty grid drawings titled *On a Clear Day* in 1971, screen-printed by Parasol Press in 1973, when she worked with a printer to produce perfectly straight lines (fig.12). By contrast, the hand-drawn lines in Martin's paintings have a slight tremor where graphite is drawn over the surface of gessoed canvas, and where there are slight changes of pressure after she used an eighteen-inch ruler to draw the lines in sections (see also Chapter 5). As part of her avoidance of technique, she decided that irregularities were to be eliminated (Anna Lovatt, *In Pursuit of the Neutral: Agnes Martin's Shimmering Line*, Tate, 2015:101-102). Scholar and art writer Suzanne Hudson wrote of the screen-prints: 'the resulting sheets – with inscription clarified and autographic strokes simultaneously effaced – develop the cut of one and the colour of the other to effect an unprecedented evenness of line' (in Cooke et al. ed. 2011: 126). Yet, when the prints were exhibited at Tate, London, in 2015, my experience of viewing them was that slight gradations of the grey ink caused similar perceptual effects to the uneven quality of her drawn lines. Although the lines were straight, the subtle irregularity that she claimed to have erased still persisted.

Martin wrote in 1975 that the prints express 'innocence of mind', a concern throughout her career, and that the grid compositions could be a focus for assuming a state of quiet awareness; 'If you can go with them and hold your mind as empty and tranquil as they are and recognize your feelings at the same time you will realize your full response to this work' (Martin, in Glimcher, A. 2012:60). Her New York gallerist, Arne Glimcher, visited her studio in Albuquerque, New Mexico in January 1978. In a conversation about the prints, Martin told him: 'It was good to get back to my grids at last because they are a rest – they tranquilize me' (Glimcher, A. 2012:104). This implied a calm state of mind,

despite episodes of mental confusion in New York, when she was admitted to Bellevue hospital (Princenthal, 2015:152). Princenthal wrote that when success became problematic, Martin sought 'peace and quiet and uninterrupted time to do work'. However, she concluded that rather than making art as a cathartic process, Martin used painting as a lens through which to view and organise the world (2015:162, 176).



Fig.12 Agnes Martin, *On a Clear Day* (1973) one screen print from a portfolio of thirty prints, grey on Japanese rag paper, each measuring 12 x 12 inches (30.5 x 30.5cm) Image: Tate, copyright Estate of Agnes Martin/DACS 2015

My perception is that Martin resolutely concentrated on the activity of painting, and that she did not use meditation in a therapeutic sense to enhance her well-being. Instead, she chose meditation as a method for achieving not only a still mind, but also heightened awareness. This tranquil but active state of awareness provided her with space for creative thought.

## 2.4 Tantra art

Martin was aware of similarities between her grids and Tantric diagrams. In interviews conducted between 1995 and 1996, Martin explained to Joan Simon that: 'There was a scholar who dug up a Tantric drawing that was just like my grid, and it was made of rectangles, too, just exactly like mine'. When asked if she was surprised to see a similarity between her artwork and a drawing for meditation, she replied 'I was surprised. I didn't think anybody had made a grid quite like that' (Simon, 1996:87). Haskell also wrote that Martin's grids were a non-hierarchical harmonious structure that 'resembled the patterned grid and stacks of parallel lines used in Tantric art as a meditation aid in focusing the mind on itself' (Haskell, 1992:104-105).

A year after Martin's paintings were shown alongside works by Sol Le Witt, Daniel Buren and Robert Ryman at Documenta V in Kassel in 1972, Hermann Kern, a lawyer who ran a private exhibition space, installed an exhibition of Martin's work in a three-roomed apartment; The Kunstraum Munchen, in Munich. Kern compared Martin's artwork to Tantrism, also exhibiting a nineteenth century yantra from Nepal consisting of an ink-drawn grid on paper (Maria Muller-Schareck, in Tate, 2015:198-199). A yantra is an aid to meditation, being the yogic equivalent of the Buddhist mandala. It is an arrangement of shapes or designs with a bindu point, a focus of energy, at its centre (see following page and Appendix B).

After first seeing only images of Tantra art, primarily in the book *Tantra Song* (2011), I consequently saw actual Tantric diagrams in the exhibition *Thinking Tantra* (Drawing Room, London, 24 November 2016 – 19 February 2017). Some anonymous Tantric drawings from the second half of the nineteenth century were shown alongside more recent work by contemporary artists who were inspired by Tantra art. Curators Rebecca Heald and Amrita Jhaveri, with specialist guidance on Tantra art from gallerist Joost van der Bergh, organised the exhibition. They were informed by Richard Tuttle's collection of Tantra art, and several of his related sculptural reliefs were exhibited. One Tantra work in the exhibition, similar in size to the page from a small book, had earlier been shown as an image by Franck Andre Jamme in *Tantra Song*. He travelled to Rajasthan,

India, to research Tantra art for his changing collection of this work. In *Tantra Song*, he wrote:

Tantrism appeared in India, within Hinduism, around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> Century, C.E. In Sanskrit 'tantra' means 'loom' or 'weave', but also 'treatise'. The earliest traces of these paintings have been found in books and treatises dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Then, gradually, the images were taken out of books, to be 'worked', meditated upon, separate from the texts. (Jamme, *Tantra Song*, 2011:14).

It is significant that 'Tantra' can also mean loom or weave, as this repeats the relation between weaving and meditative focus, like that in Martin's and Tawney's drawings (figs 4-7). Tantrism, described by Jamme, is an active meditation where 'the adept actually attempts to identify with the image before them and, through it, with the specific deity that it evokes' (2011:99). Jamme has used the Tantra works as a focus for thought in his daily life, but without their religious function. He described that he begins by freely focusing on a Tantra work to see what the piece makes him think of, and through the rest of the day, like practitioners of Tantra meditation, he can re-see it in his mind to associate it with the thoughts he had in his mind when he looked at it earlier. He uses this method in a practical way as a support for his writing (2011:15). I am interested that although Jamme does not intend to follow the traditional religious beliefs associated with Tantra drawings, he has found a way in which he can use the images as an aid for creative focus.

Martin's systematic art-making was unlike the prescribed drawing methods used for yantras, which are set down as ritualised forms. However, there is a correlation between the meditative, concentrated attention she gave to drawings of line and mark and the similarly focused attention required to draw a yantra. Below, I briefly describe how yantra drawings are made, as a contrast with Martin's method of making drawings. This is an abbreviated account of a more detailed interpretation by Professor S.K. Ramachandra Rao (*The Yantras*, Delhi, 1988:31). (Also, see Appendix B: Yantras).

A yantra is a field in which a Spirit functions, or is a network of energies symbolising the relation between an individual and the cosmos. It is self-contained with a strict boundary line, and within it the geometric shapes direct energy outwards from the



Spirit. The forms are powerful interactions of energy lines and are comprised of lines, triangles and squares. A point (bindu) is a focal source where the other forms derive their energy and where the Spirit resides. A line denotes 'movement of the spirit' or a 'line of energy'.

Drawing is done freehand, without instruments, and must be completed in one sitting with focused attention. Each form must be drawn without lifting the pen from the surface, and the whole yantra must be completed while repeating a mantra. The drawing can be made outwards from the central point, or inwards to the centre.

'Creation' is a movement away from the centre, while 'absorption' or assimilation is movement inwards. Complex mantras are then inscribed onto the drawings. There is an equivalence between the deity, a mantra and a yantra.

### Notes from my practice

I investigated through my practice; first examining images of Tantric paintings. In the example of Tantric art in fig.13, elongated red 'triangles' are symbolic of the extended tongue of the Hindu goddess Kali; its repetition intended to increase the power of the field of energy contained in the work (Jamme, 2011:85 and plate 5).

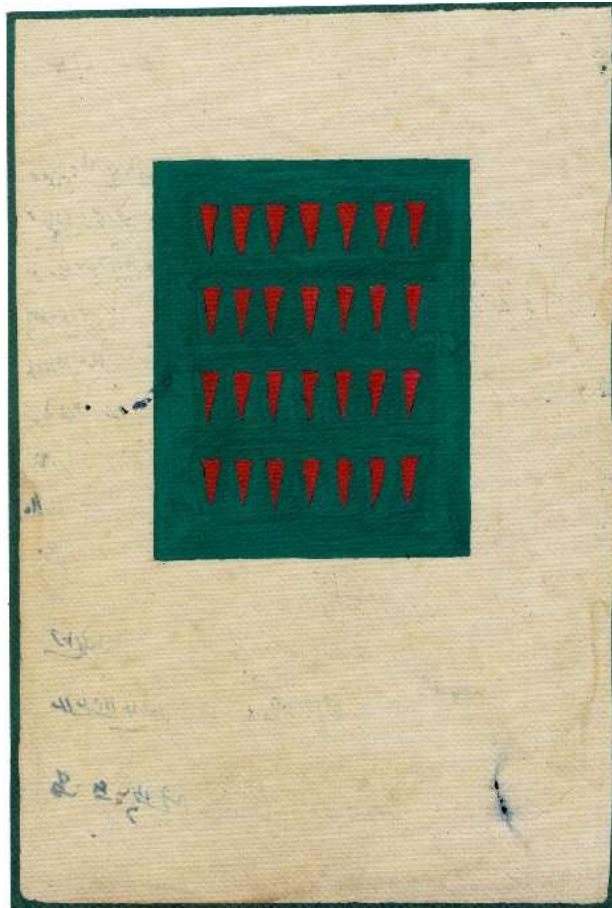


Fig.13 Tantric painting from Udaipur (1999), artist unknown, water-based pigment and ink on salvaged paper (13 x 9 inches), Image: *Tantra Song, Tantric Painting from Rajasthan*.

Already torn and patched together papers are used as supports for some Tantra artworks, with existing writing in ink. Careful selection of materials in order to find particular qualities is an important part of my methodology, and I replicated the use of salvaged materials by searching shelves in charity shops for second-hand books, and sorted through them for unprinted pages. This was a lengthy process where many piles of old books were inspected closely, taking hours at a time. Sifting and categorising different types of paper had already become a part of my practice, developed as a method when I folded and exchanged sections between different artworks (see figs. 71-72, page 123). Using that method, I sometimes found that little or no material intervention was required, and that only the selection and placement of materials was needed. Attentive looking developed slowly over a period of time, and I practiced it in my surrounding environment and also when I experimented earlier with packaging materials.

The old books that I had decided upon for my artworks were later spread out on a table, where I cut and placed sections together, paying particular attention to different tones and textures. Any large areas of print or bold writing were removed, so that only light markings remained. The selected papers and book covers acted as a substrate for new artwork, while retaining some signs of their earlier use. I also wanted to echo the fragile and delicate qualities that I observed in Martin's surfaces, and to repeat the tension between exactitude and slight imperfection. Briony Fer wrote that in work made by Martin in the early 1960s: 'The balance between regularity and irregularity, precision and imprecision, accent and interval, is precariously maintained, just.'

(2004:51). I focused on enacting a careful drawing of a regular composition set against pre-existing marks; a surface that showed subtle changes of texture and colour.

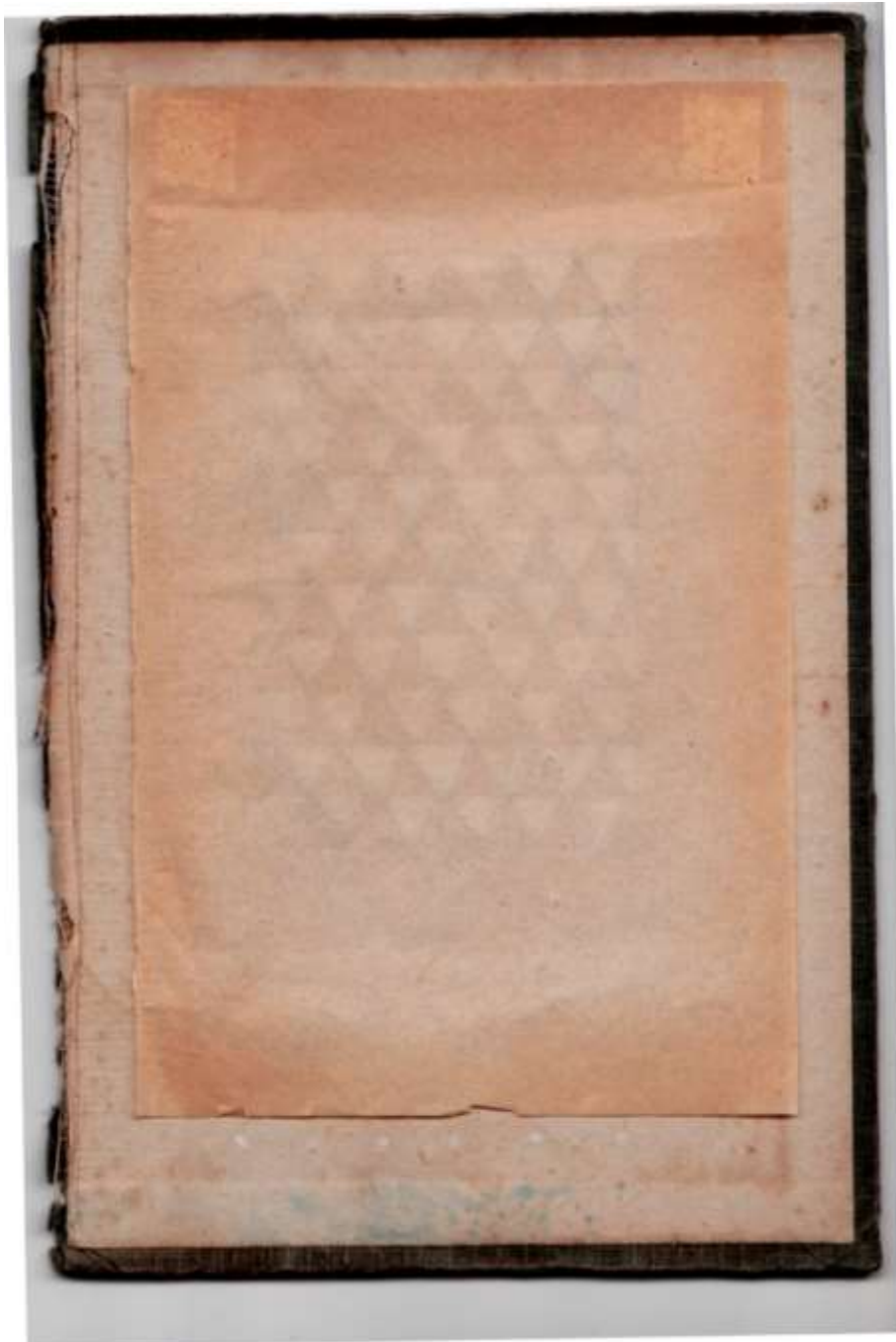
In my artwork (fig.14), a semi-transparent page like tracing paper has been removed from an antique book and attached over a grid of pencil-drawn triangular forms on the inside of one half of a book cover. Ageing has caused discolouration of the thin semi-transparent paper to a golden brown. Barely concealed under the layer of paper, the triangles are slightly uneven where they were marked out and painted in carefully by hand using a brush and white calligraphy ink. Although I used ink, I also tried waxy chinagraph pencil on similar paper to consider different consistencies and light-reflectivity. Light effects on surface are discussed when I view a collection of Martin's paintings at the Harwood Museum, Taos (Chapter 4.3) and at Dia:Beacon (see 6.1).

In my composition, I have mirrored Martin's method of repetition of geometric forms and also replicated the 'tongues' in the Tantric painting. A harmonious balance was sought in the arrangement of the grid, so that the inverted triangles are aligned and are just touching. Blue mottled ink or dye stains are pre-existent on the lower edge of the book cover, and a row of dots has been applied above the blue mottling. The structure is supported or 'held' by the row of dots, which were also painted using a fine brush with white calligraphy ink. There is a faint water stain spread out over the lower left book cover edge.

The top layer of semi-transparent paper has a small tear turned in at the bottom, and one edge of the paper turns slightly outward where the

page was bound into a book margin. These irregularities are further emphasised by the cut and frayed edge of the cover, where it was detached from the book spine. No additional detail has been added to the worn green outer cover, so that focus is mainly given to the drawing veiled under the thin paper. The paper is attached by photo mounts in the top corners and can be lifted to more closely observe the grid drawing underneath. The mounts are visible through the surface of the transparent paper, so that making is not hidden from the viewer.

Facing page: Fig.14 *Untitled* (2015) ink, graphite and paper with photo mounts on book cover, 19 x 12.5cm. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps



For the purpose of examining grid drawings in a contemporary context as a focus for thought, and in relation to Tantra art, I considered Gabriel Orozco's circle drawings and paintings. In a book to accompany an exhibition of these works (*Thinking in Circles*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1 August – 18 October 2013), Briony Fer wrote:

...Orozco's interests have a wide imaginative span. They reach to Tantric art not because of its spiritual essence or its mysticism, but on the contrary because of the way simple geometric shapes are tantamount to 'exercises', actively setting in train meditative processes that expand into a vast cosmology... (Fer, 2013:53).

Orozco made many different permutations of circular forms in his studio works since the nineties. During a panel discussion at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, in 2013, Orozco explained his reasons for making this work to art historians Benjamin Buchloh and Briony Fer. He described how his original intention was not to exhibit them, but that the works were instead an 'exercise' for the mind while thinking about how to make other different types of work (Internet: *Gabriel Orozco, Benjamin Buchloh and Briony Fer Panel Discussion*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 10 September 2013)



Fig. 15 Installation view of work by Gabriel Orozco at the exhibition *Thinking in Circles* at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1 August – 18 October 2013). Image: Fruitmarket Gallery

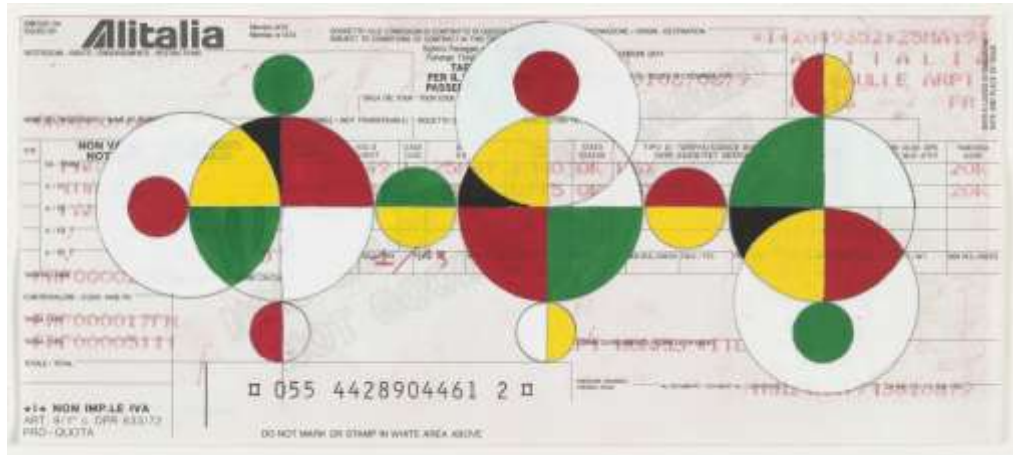


Fig. 16 Gabriel Orozco, *Ticket – Alitalia*, (2001) Gouache, synthetic polymer paint, and pencil on airline receipt, 8.9 x 19.1cm, Image: Moma, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift. Image © 2017 Gabriel Orozco

Orozco uses a wide array of materials, including found items like photographs and tickets, on which to inscribe or incorporate circular motifs as a form of thinking and as a meditative practice. I recognise his openness to making art with pre-used surfaces as being similar to my practice, although I apply criteria in this study that could prevent my use of some materials. He has no hierarchy of materials, so that circular forms have been applied to acetate and notebook pages, and, in an example of this work that I saw in another exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, exist as balls of polyurethane foam sitting in a cardboard melon tray (*Possibilities of the Object: Experiments in Modern and Contemporary Brazilian Art*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 6 March – 25 May 2015). Schematic paintings of spheres sit alongside his many other different flat or three-dimensional surfaces, so that the circular works occupy a place between painting and sculpture.

In this chapter, I investigated some aspects of a contemplative practice. My findings are summarised below, as an invitation to art practitioners and to people who would like to use such work as a meditative aid.



### **Findings for art-making in the context of researching Agnes Martin**

- Meditative-ness, as practised by Martin when following Taoist philosophy, requires acceptance rather than intellect.
- This meditative art-making requires a state of ‘active attentiveness’, and to give focused concentration. Heightened awareness can be developed over time by giving attention to immediate surroundings and to art work.
- The art practitioner can use this work as an aid to meditative thought, or as an ‘exercise’ for the brain when thinking through new types of art practice.
- There is a relation between drawing repetitive weave-line and meditative focus, and this is affirmed by the meaning of Tantra as ‘weave’.
- Meditative thought can mean giving care and reflection to an activity.
- This type of practice can be used to induce a calm or tranquil state.
- Practical knowledge can be gained through the thoughtful manipulation and observation of materials.
- Attention is given to materiality; different surfaces and marks. A meditative work can include subtle visual differences like that of hand-drawn marks or found marks juxtaposed with a regular composition.
- Practice can offer new interpretations of artworks through experimentation with materials.

### **Contemplative artworks from the perspective of the viewer**

- The works can act as a meditative focus for the viewer, but need not have a religious function.
- Repetitive marks or forms, like that in weave, can communicate a sense that the maker gave focused concentration to the work
- This type of artwork can communicate a sense of calm.
- Contemplative experience may be available through ‘sense-experience’, and this is more than the visual experience usually offered by paintings. It includes: sound, scent, and touch.

These findings conclude one part of my investigation into the contemplative aspect of Martin's practice. As I wrote earlier in my introduction, Martin experimented with found materials to make new types of work with physical depth. In the following chapter I write how, at Coenties Slip in New York, her work was informed by other artists in that community. I investigate the developments that occurred in her practice after she made work with found materials, and how she used a method of transcription. I have already described Martin's repetitive marks as stitch-like lines, but the next chapter will focus on her grid arrangements of real objects and their relation to her paintings.

### Chapter 3: Coenties Slip

My main focus in this chapter is on an important development in Martin's practice during the late fifties, when her experimentation with three-dimensional forms produced grid arrangements of actual objects. At that point in the evolution of her practice, Martin recalled rows of planted crops on her uncle's farm, and mentioned this as a connection between her linear grid compositions and her lived experience (Wilson, 1966:47). By 1960, her constructions of found materials were being replaced by grid paintings, and after 1963 she no longer used objects at all in her artwork. At the end of this chapter, in the notes from my practice, I explain how I investigated Martin's translation of objects into marks.

Martin occupied a studio in a dilapidated building at Coenties Slip, which placed her within a community of artists who had a shared quest for a new manner of art-making, but who had independently framed goals for their practice. Critic and art historian Dore Ashton described a meditative approach that set Martin apart from her contemporaries:

In a city loft or in the desert or mountains, Martin's temperament inclined her to solitude. During her decade in New York from 1957 she did encounter younger artists such as Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman who had studios at Coenties Slip, and she did see how many other artists were grappling with pure abstraction in the lean ways following Abstract Expressionism. But her dialogue with nature took its own course. A meditative painter, the question as to what painting can be never left her in peace. (Ashton, in Hayward Gallery, 1977:8)

In New York, Martin studied paintings by Newman and Rothko, and in 1957 understood through Reinhardt's compositions that 'understatement' could invite sustained looking (Rosenberger, 2016:105). Reinhardt sought to eliminate any ideas of representation from his closely-toned paintings, so that they were only about painting (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1989: 116). Both he and Martin sought to express emotion in their paintings through arrangements of symmetrical forms (Princenthal, 2015:56, 99).



Fig. 17 Ad Reinhardt, *Blue Painting* (1953) Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 203.2 cm, Image: wikiart.org  
©Ad Reinhardt

Martin's first show at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1958 was of 'simplified, biomorphic forms in open fields of pale, translucent colour that had characterised her painting of the previous two years' (Haskell, 1992:101). Martin's work did not change abruptly when she arrived in New York, but was a progression from her earlier paintings in New Mexico. Christina Bryan Rosenberger wrote that Martin's first year in New York was the continuation of an 'apprenticeship', in which she absorbed an understanding of contemporary practice by visiting museums and galleries, where assemblage works and Pop Art were the current art forms (Rosenberger, 2016:95). *The Art of Assemblage* curated by William C. Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1961 highlighted a trend within a new generation of artists towards working with found materials.



Fig. 18 Agnes Martin with artists Jack Youngerman (and his wife Delphine Seyrig and their son Duncan), Robert Indiana and Ellsworth Kelly on the rooftop of their building at Coenties Slip in 1958, Photograph: Hans Namuth

A number of artists had taken studios in the dilapidated seaport area around Coenties Slip in the late 1950s because the buildings were available at cheap rents. Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were nearby on Pearl Street. Many artists were making sculptural objects with materials found in the neighbourhood. Robert Indiana, who shared Martin's building, recounted how the demolition of warehouses, ships chandleries and sail-lofts to make way for new buildings on Wall Street provided a wealth of materials before he was able to afford paint and canvas (Glimcher, M. ed. in Pace Gallery, 1993:10). A catalogue essay, which accompanied an exhibition at Pace Gallery, New York, described a diverse group of artists in that community who consciously set themselves apart from the Abstract Expressionists in the Tenth Street and Cedar Tavern area of New York:

It is a curious historical conjunction that, like Indiana, many American artists were descending into the street (Louise Nevelson, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes

Oldenburg, and Jim Dine, to name a few) to gather materials for their work. Protesting the 'academization' of Abstract Expressionism, they sought to endow their work with material reality, thereby connecting art and life in a new way (Mildred Glimcher, in Pace Gallery, 1993:11).

Holland Cotter, a critic for the New York Times, noted that although the group were independent of each other and separate from the 'New York School' of painting, they were bound together by how and where they lived. Cotter wrote that critics had recognized the effects that the artists had on each other's work, and implied a relation between Lenore Tawney's weaving and Martin's painting (*Where City History Was Made, A 50s Group Made Art History*, New York Times, 5 January 1993: C11 and C16) (see Chapter 2.2). The intimacy and support shared between the artists within this group is further described on page 166. Martin's work during the years 1958 and 1959 showed a marked change from her earlier paintings, when she began to use materials found near her studio, introducing different elements. Immediately prior to her constructions and grids, Martin was using oil paint to make paintings with soft-edged rectangular forms (see Chapter 6.1). New artworks were constructed with wood, wooden knobs, boat spikes, wire, nails, bolts and bottle caps. Examples of these works are shown in figs.19 and 21.

Although many of the artists were sourcing their materials from the same location, each progressed differently. In a photograph of Kelly's studio in 1957 there is a fin-shaped object on the wall behind Martin (fig.20). This unusual shape is also seen in Martin's work *The Garden* (1958) (fig.21), which I saw when it was exhibited at Tate, London in 2015. While Kelly progressed towards shaped canvases with strong colour, Martin's construction shows the beginning of a grid arrangement.



Fig. 19 Agnes Martin, *Water* (1958) Painted wire and bottle caps mounted on wood, 99.1 x 99.1cm. Photo by Joan W. Harris, courtesy of Pace Gallery; © 2015 Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Fig. 20 Agnes Martin in Ellsworth Kelly's studio at 3-5 Coenties Slip in 1957. Photograph: Hans Namuth



Fig. 21 Agnes Martin, *The Garden* (1958) Oil paint and found objects on wood. 134.6 x 25.4 x 5.1cm. Photograph Tate Modern © 2015 Agnes Martin/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Ann Wilson, a fellow artist at Coenties Slip, wrote that when Martin talked about these regular arrangements of objects, she also spoke of fields of navy beans near Flint, in Michigan, and the planting of forty acres of potatoes on her uncle's farm, with 'an eye in each square of a chequerboard field, all by hand'. Martin also recalled big pine trees, uprooted and laid down in lines along the roads, 'running straight as a die for miles and miles to the horizon'. Wilson summarised the relationship between Martin's artworks and the act of planting when she wrote: 'The artist saw her paintings in concept as large endless penetrations, like a field drifting – a field, an exact planting (Wilson, *Linear Webs*, Art and Artists, October 1966:47).



As Martin's work progressed, she used canvas or linen supports for her paintings, but continued to use nails, which she inserted into the marked-out rectangles of small grid paintings. An untitled grid painting from 1962, similar to *Little Sister* (fig.1) was exhibited at the *Agnes Martin* Tate retrospective in London, 2015. The canvas in both paintings is mounted on wood, but over time the nails can loosen (see Chapter 6.2). Wood and other objects were then abandoned. Martin explained in 1966 that: 'I did a whole show of circles after I began with lines; I never showed those circles; I never sold them, because I was already started off on the right path with the lines of nails' (Martin, in Wilson, 1966:47). She described how she made the painting *Homage to Greece* in 1959 (fig.22) by using nails to make an arched line pinned through cut-up squares of canvas. She was also making other work around that time with steel bolts. Martin's recognition that 'The lines began as points in space' (Martin, in Wilson, 1966:47) is important when I make new artworks and when I consider how I can present my artworks as having physical depth. This method of transcription was complete when Martin drew into paint using a pencil. Fig.23 shows a grid painting made in 1960, where Martin has drawn marks and lines into the surface of the paint.

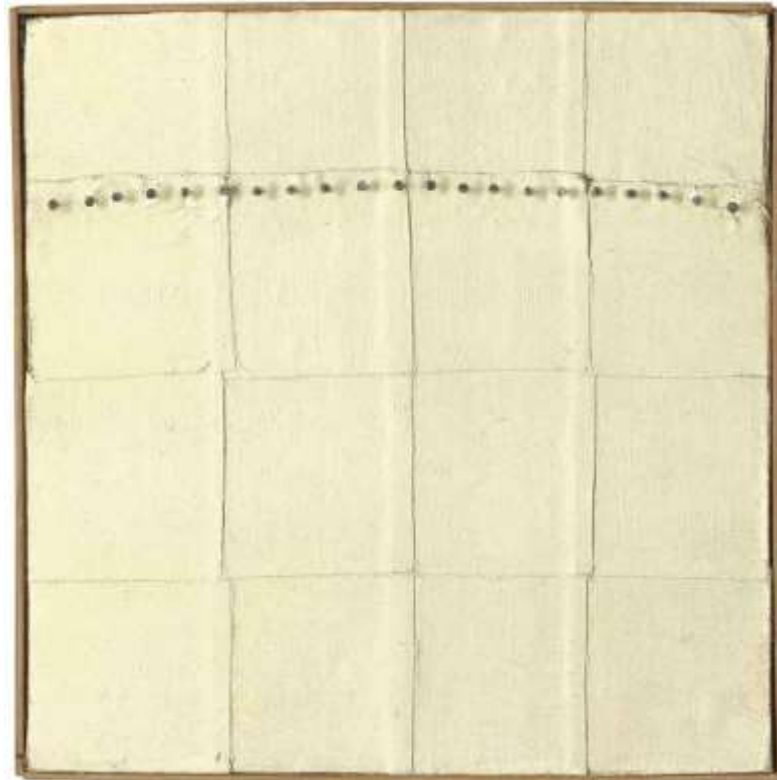


Fig. 22 Agnes Martin, *Homage to Greece* (1959) Oil paint and nails on canvas laid on panel 12x 12 inches. Image [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org) © Agnes Martin

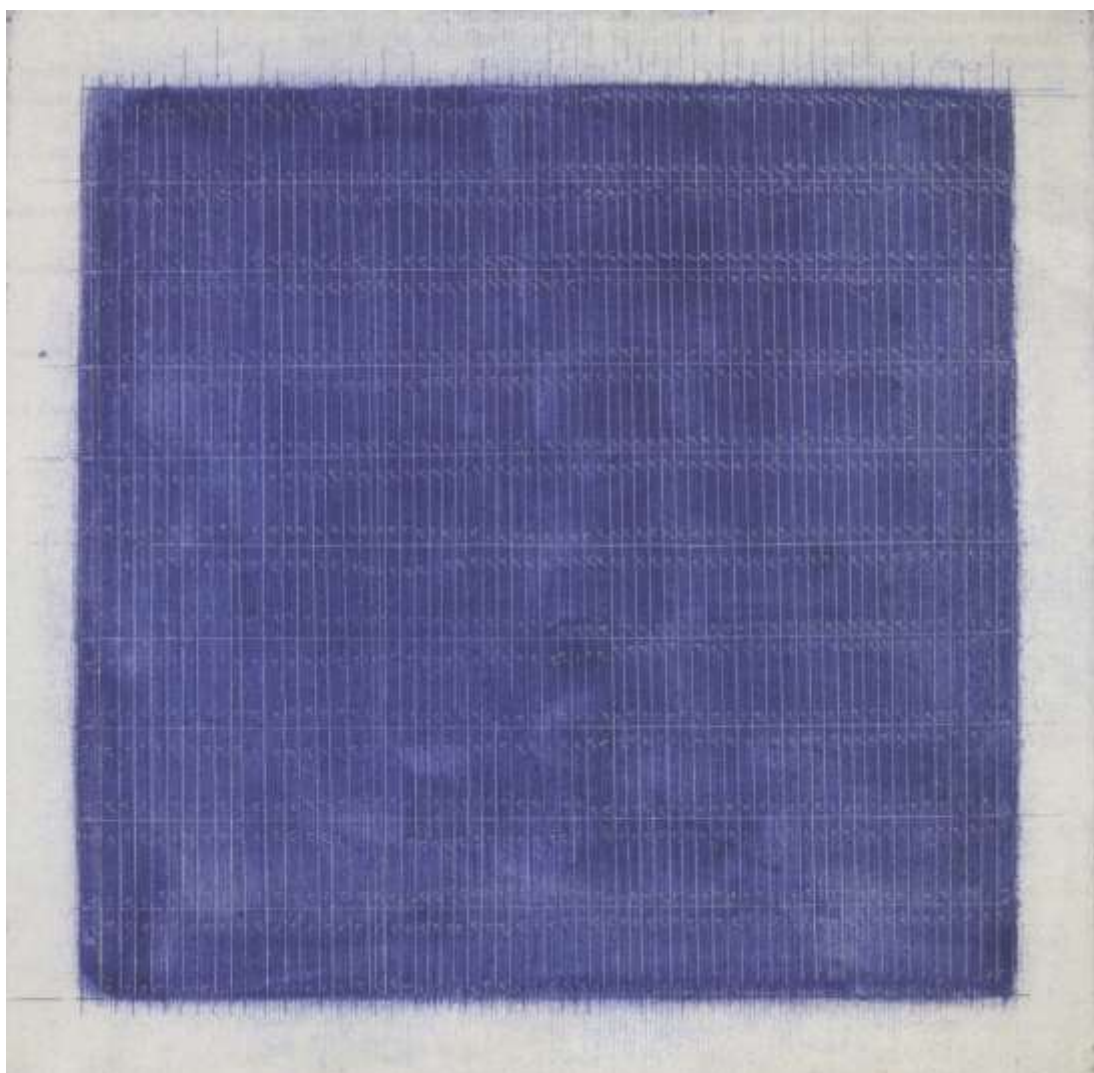


Fig. 23 Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1960, oil on linen, 12 × 12 inches. © 2006 by Agnes Martin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**Notes from my practice - A visit to Coenties Slip**

I visited the seaport district around Coenties Slip in February 2016.

Public access is available to one of the original buildings, the Fraunces Tavern on the same block as Martin's former studio (fig.26). Both this building and the nearby Seaport Museum (fig.25) on South Street have large open interiors with exposed high red brick walls, wood beams and wood floors, lending the buildings a bare industrial feel.

There are metal star-shaped studs high up on some exterior brick walls, and I discovered later that these are part of bracing structures, sometimes seen on old buildings where the walls can lean from the perpendicular. I observed that the studs and rods pinning the outer walls were like the nails, bolts and bottle caps that pierce Martin's early grid paintings. The braces tie the rafters of a roof together so that if the wall begin to lean, the rods through the wall can be tightened by a winding mechanism found in the attic. Coenties Slip was built on top of a filled-in water inlet, and use of this mechanism suggests that the foundations were liable to movement.

My observation that the fabric of these buildings is openly displayed parallels my awareness of the construction of my studio (page 9). It further contributed to my understanding of Martin's decision not to erase or hide signs of a painting's construction, but to purposely show that marks are functional rather than being purely an aesthetic device within a painting. Although I was able to see some of the original buildings at Coenties Slip, I saw nothing to show that this area had been home to a community of artists.

Following pages:

Fig. 24 Coenties Slip, where new buildings have been built in front of earlier buildings. Photograph Sharon Phelps

Fig. 25 The Seaport Museum on South Street, a former ship chandlery. Photograph: Sharon Phelps

Fig. 26 Fraunces Tavern at the far end of the block of buildings where Martin had a studio. Photograph: Sharon Phelps

### Chapter 3: Coenties Slip







**Notes from my practice:**

**Collecting objects at Vauxhall slipway, London, May 2016**

I investigated, through my practice, the process by which Martin translated objects into marks in her paintings and drawings by re-enacting how she salvaged materials from around the seaport area at Coenties Slip. I visited Vauxhall slipway at the River Thames in May 2016, with my supervisor Paul Ryan. I wanted to investigate how collecting objects (figs. 27–32) might contribute to new practice (figs 33–39). The tide had sorted materials by weight and buoyancy, so that small metal objects such as nails were piled together. I found several boat spikes, so that I was able to examine an object similar to that used by Martin.

Facing page:

Fig. 27 A collection of nails and objects of similar size and weight which were piled together by the tide at Vauxhall Slipway, May 2016. Photograph Sharon Phelps

Fig. 28 Boat spike from Thames, May 2016. Photograph Sharon Phelps

Fig. 29 Objects washed up by the tide along the River Thames at Vauxhall Slipway, May 2016. Photograph Sharon Phelps





Having quickly realised that we each preferred certain types of material, we looked for objects which fell into those categories and to exchange them with each other. This act of exchange, where we recognised materials preferred by another person, was repeated at a workshop at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, also May 2016 (see Chapter 11.2), when we noticed during our discussion that participants were trying to ascertain whether they had made work like my examples.

At the slipway, my categories included small metal objects and fragments of decorated ceramic, while Paul preferred organic forms and materials which resembled pieces of leather strap or shoe, and ceramic fragments. Our most interesting finds, and exchange of objects, came at the end of the visit. These were a metal box (fig. 30) and a metal cup with handle (fig. 32), which was later identified as a finger lamp. When we picked up items near the water's edge, we were sometimes surprised that the material was not what we had initially thought. For example, a small object that looked like metal could be leather. This provoked further thought, so that in my practice I considered transcribing objects in materials that were different from the original.

Facing page:

Fig. 30 Small metal box measuring 9 x 3.5cm, found at Vauxhall Slipway, May 2016. Photograph: Sharon Phelps

Fig. 31 Metal pin-like object found at Vauxhall Slipway, 25 x 4cm, May 2016. Photograph Sharon Phelps

Fig. 32 A small metal 'cup' found at Vauxhall Slipway by Sharon Phelps and added to Paul Ryan's 'collection', May 2016. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Paul Ryan. This object was later identified as a finger lamp.



### Testing transcription as a method in my practice

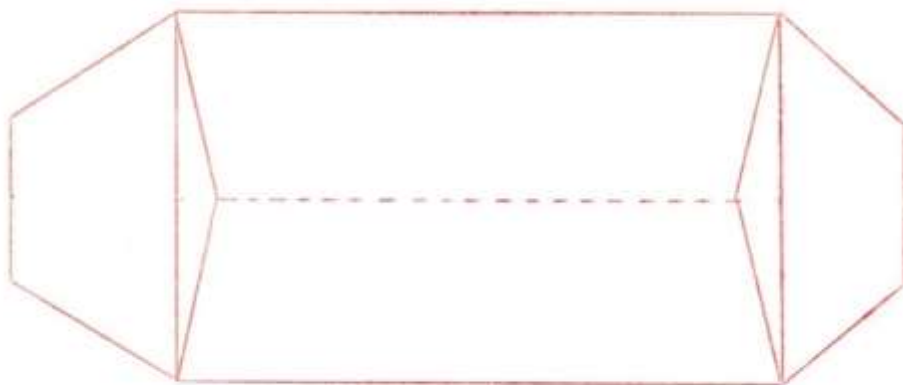
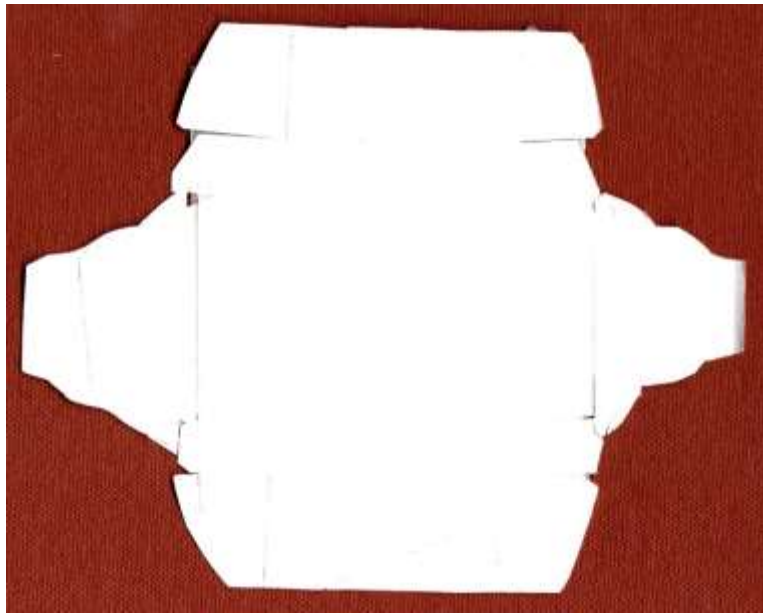
One of the objects that I collected at Vauxhall slipway was a small metal box (fig. 30), which resembled a container for cigarette papers. I first traced around each section of the box on paper, then joined the paper sections with tape and folded the paper replica to check that it resembled the original. The small paper 'box' was then flattened (fig. 33) and scaled up to be transcribed in a schematic form. The final form was a monoprint drawing, using orange ink on thin Japanese washi paper (fig. 34).

The monoprint drawing is not exact in shape and is larger than the object. It lacks the curved, broken and bent edges of the original metal box, and the side flaps are shown folded inwards. However, the ink has bled into the paper giving a slight uneven-ness like the rusted edges of the metal box. The broken line indicates an opening and is repeated from old paper dressmaking patterns, which I found in charity shops. Broken line in those patterns is usually accompanied by printed instructions to fold or cut. The delicate texture and subtle pale tone of the washi paper cannot be seen in this image, so that the edges of the washi paper are not distinct when printed here.

Facing page:

Fig. 33 Folded paper replica of the metal box (2016). Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 34 Monoprint ink drawing on A4 size Japanese washi paper (2016). Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

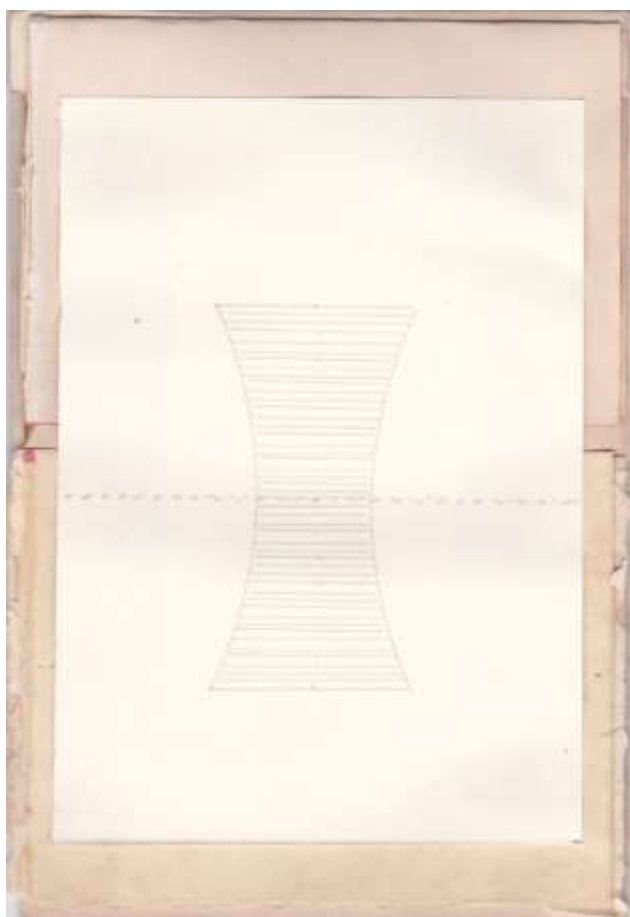


A separate drawing was made of the negative space inside the metal box using silverpoint on coated paper (fig. 35). Closely positioned lines indicate an interior space or shadow. I also drew other marks that I had discovered in my experimentation with found materials. Two parallel and almost overlapping broken lines that run horizontally across the middle of the form in fig. 35 are my transcription of the stitching that holds pages together inside a book cover. When I removed pages from old books to make new artworks I became aware of this type of parallel stitching. The support for the drawing in figs. 35 and 36 comprises folded blank pages taken from old books, which have been layered and stuck together. The overall size of the artwork is similar to that of a small book cover and feels rigid because of the layers.

When the artwork is held and examined from the side, the viewer can see between the layers. On the other side of the work (fig. 36) there are paired pencil dots in the two lower corners. The sharp pencil point has been pressed firmly into the paper, so that the pencil marks are also like puncture holes left by staples, a type of mark that I replicated from my experimentation with packaging materials (see figs. 83-84, page 149). The ambiguity in appearance between pencil marks and puncture holes also refers to my experience of examining Martin's painting *The Islands* (1961) (Page 85, fig.48). In that painting there are dots along the outer edge of the canvas, and the dark dots resemble puncture holes.

Facing page: Fig. 35 *Untitled* (2016), Silverpoint on paper, 18 x 12.5cm. (side 1)  
Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 36 Side 2 of the same artwork.



In another experiment, I also made a monoprint drawing to show the nails and a long pin-like object found at Vauxhall Slipway (fig. 37), with the drawn marks ordered into a grid. The appearance of the long pin is altered in the drawing to look like a symmetrical form, echoing Martin's use of symmetry. This drawing is laid out in a similar manner to Navajo weave (see Chapter 4.2), so that it superficially resembles symmetry, but there is intended deviation and asymmetry. Another monoprint grid-like drawing of the pin and nails was folded into a 'box', continuing my investigation of the metal box shown earlier in fig. 30, so that the printed paper is layered rather than flat.

In summary, I have investigated Martin's method of transcription using my practice and shown instances where I transcribed from objects to make new and different artworks, and where I also drew upon an evolving vocabulary of marks. In some of these new works I showed physical depth by folding and layering (figs. 35-36, and figs. 38-39). I discovered in an unexpected occurrence that when ink bled unevenly into the surface of the paper it was like the edge of rusty metal (fig. 34).

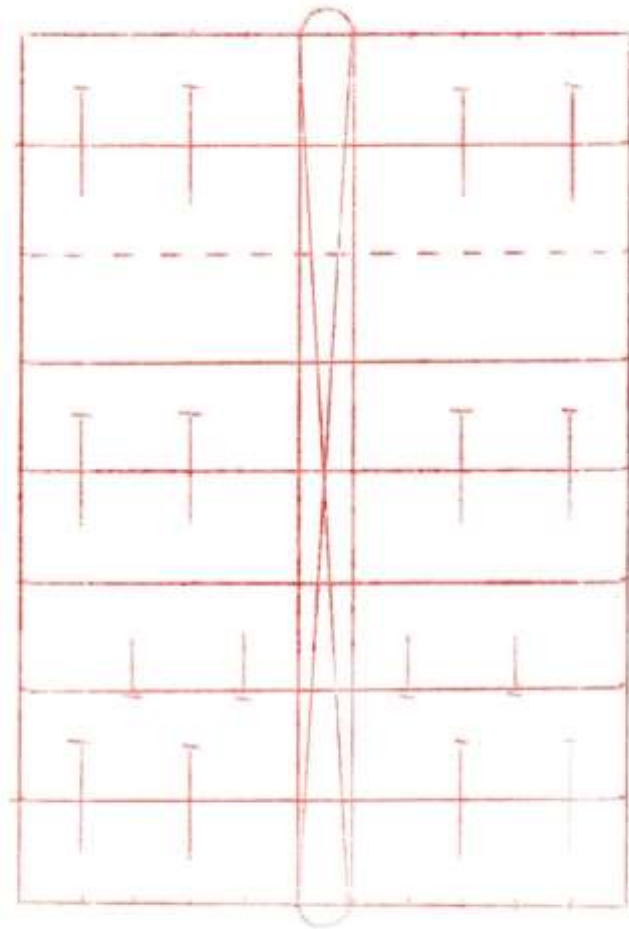
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Fig. 37 'Nail and pin' monoprint ink drawing on A4 size Japanese washi paper (2016) Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

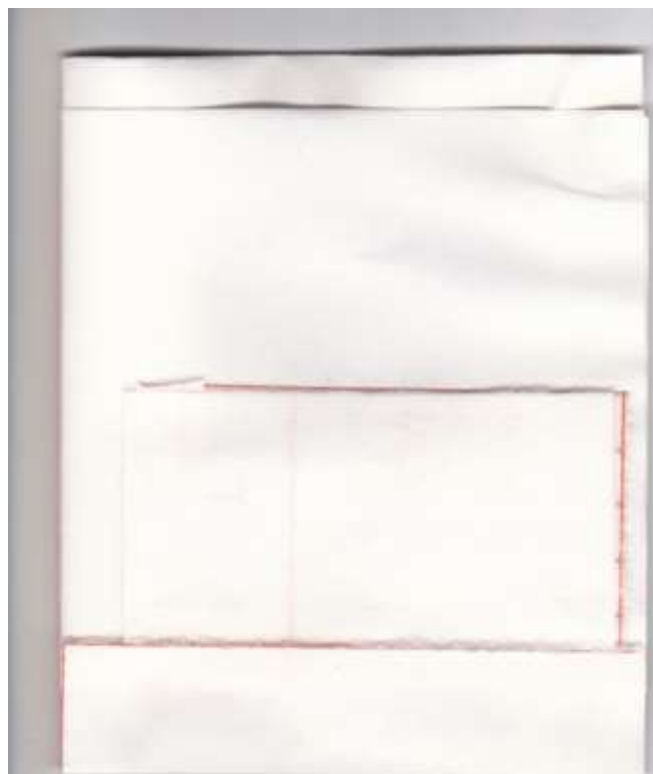
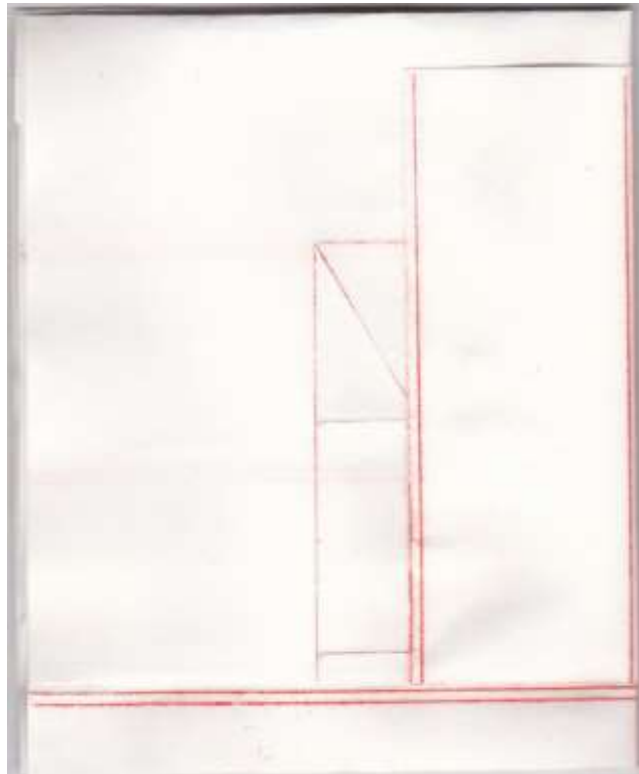
Fig. 38 A folded monoprint ink drawing on washi paper (2016), 13 x 10.5cm (side 1) Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 39 The same drawing as above, (side 2)





### Chapter 3: Coenties Slip



### Chapter 3: Coenties Slip

In this chapter, I wrote that Martin's approach was informed by her study of some other artists in New York, including Rothko and Newman, but that her meditative work has a particular relation to that of Reinhardt. I described how artists at Coenties Slip worked separately to make different new art forms, but that artists in that close-knit community also influenced each other through their work. When I wrote of my visit to Coenties Slip, I studied the construction of the buildings, which, like Martin's paintings, appeared to be functional and not 'tidied up'.

When Martin arrived at Coenties Slip, New York, in 1957, she was already aware of the traditions and beliefs of Native Americans, and had recently been living in the northern part of New Mexico. She had a practical approach to both life and art which included different types of making. In the following chapter, I describe how Martin built homes and studios in New Mexico using wood poles to support adobe bricks. In the next chapter, as well as highlighting Martin's practical approach in building and art-making, I introduce the possibility that local Navajo weave was an influence on her art.

## Chapter 4: New Mexico

In this chapter I examine how the landscape and culture of New Mexico may have influenced Martin's art practice, and I consider the relation between her different types of making. I investigate a traditional method of building with adobe, and show a correlation between Martin's grid paintings and Native American weave. This region has been popular with writers and artists since the early 1900s, notably Georgia O'Keeffe and D. H. Lawrence among others. Martin first visited Taos in 1947, and lived there from 1952 (Simon, 1996). She returned there permanently in 1967 after a ten-year spell in New York. Dore Ashton wrote that 'It was the New Mexican experience which resolved her attitudes toward art and nature [...] It was while trying to paint those mountains that Martin discovered her need for symbolic means' (Hayward Gallery, 1977:7). When I visited the area in May 2016, I wanted to see first-hand how Martin's lines related to New Mexico. In an example of what he calls 'practical geometry', anthropologist Tim Ingold described how masons and carpenters of the medieval period drew lines and used geometry 'informed by a tactile and sensuous knowledge of line and surface rather than by eye for abstract, conceptual form' (Ingold, 2013:51). What I find interesting is the concept of understanding geometry through touch.

#### 4.1 Building with adobe

Martin built two studio-home complexes in New Mexico using traditional methods. Ingold, applied the term ‘practical wisdom’ to describe a ‘profound respect for traditional and local knowledge’ (Ingold, 2013:49). A proficiency in practical knowledge appropriate to the local landscape and its natural materials would have been important when Martin chose to build with wood and adobe. Arne Glimcher, Martin’s New York gallerist made one of a number of trips to Martin’s studio in Cuba, New Mexico, in October 1974, when she had only recently begun to paint again since leaving Coenties Slip (fig.40). His notes describe several buildings and sheds that included a one-room house. Three walls of the house were of natural adobe, with one white-painted wall. The ceiling comprised bark-covered tree trunks crossed by wooden planks. The studio was built of bare logs (fig. 41) (Glimcher, A. 2012: 69-70). My inquiry into a traditional method of building as an activity which Martin carried out alongside her art practice provoked thought about whether there could be some similarity of attitude when carrying out different types of making.

Victoria King's PhD research *Art of place and displacement: embodied perception and the haptic ground* (College of Fine Arts, UNSW, Australia, 2005) led her to travel to Agnes Martin’s studio in Taos, New Mexico, in 2002, to interview the artist, and she wrote down Martin’s account of house-building.

Agnes Martin -

I’ve only ever built in the natural way... I built two adobe houses in my life. On the mesa at Cuba [around 1969] I made the bricks, six at a time in a wooden frame. Then you stack them in the sun, it only takes two days it’s so hot there. I built my studio out of logs, fifty feet long by twenty-five. I was out driving one day and I came across a truck with a crane and I asked if it were for sale. They said it was. It was only \$500. So it was easy building with the logs, I didn’t even have to step on the gas, it just inched them up. I had somebody helping me. I bought the logs; he only charged me fifty cents a foot. They were big logs; it was very cheap. I put a permanent finish on them... and I made a stone fireplace so I know how heavy rocks are. It took me a year and a half to recover.



Fig. 40 Agnes Martin with Arne Glimcher in front of her studio in Cuba, New Mexico, in 1974.  
Image [www.phaidon.com](http://www.phaidon.com)



Fig. 41 Arne Glimcher in Agnes Martin's studio (no date). Photograph © Arne Glimcher

Martin showed sustained effort in art-making, as well as when she was cutting logs and carrying heavy rocks. She drew meticulous grids filled with tiny marks or dashes of paint. When she completely filled six-foot square paintings in this manner, it would have been as laborious as making six adobe bricks at a time in a wood frame to build a house. When Briony Fer wrote about Eva Hesse's experimental test pieces, she described varied forms of making in terms of a single focused line of thought. She observed that 'concentrated effort' and 'decisiveness' have equal force in all the various forms of an artist's work, concluding that we cannot relegate certain forms of making as peripheral (Fer, 2009:44). I wanted to enquire further about the parallels between Martin's house construction and her art-making. Joanna Weber elicited a response on this matter from Martin in an interview for an essay titled *The House That Agnes Martin Built* (2003).

Considered alongside her delicate paintings, the laborious manual process of house-building begs the questions: how are these houses related to her art, and are they sculptures in their own right? Before her death in 2004, I spoke with Martin about how much she enjoyed house-building. She claimed, however, that it had nothing to do with her art. What was important was her painting, she said, and neither her biography nor her other endeavours were relevant. (Weber, Image Journal, 2003)

This blunt reply shows a single-minded pursuit of painting, but does not lessen the notion that Martin's manual dexterity and clear focus played a part in both building and painting. Despite Martin refuting any connection between her painting and house-building, a category in which Weber also includes Martin's participation in the design of a special sanctuary-like gallery (fig. 52) for her paintings at the Harwood Museum in Taos, Weber concluded:

I have come to believe that it was through construction of these rooms for living and creating art that she developed her own mental spaces, which in turn informed the content and structure of her paintings. Indeed, her painting, in subject matter and in its ability to communicate intimacy, is deeply connected to the process of—and the reasons for—building a home. (Weber, Image Journal, 2003)

Martin's own writing provides another interpretation, in which the act of making invites an awareness of self. I was privileged to speak with artist Richard Tuttle, who had a long-term friendship with Martin, when he visited Chelsea College of Arts, London, in December 2015, to give a lecture about his work. He held the view that an artwork should show something of oneself, but that this was not evident in Martin's very early work before the grid paintings. At first, she had painted in different styles when she studied earlier artists, but the developments in her practice after her arrival at Coenties Slip, led her to follow an individual pathway (see Chapter 3). Martin declared 'Work is self-expression' (Martin, in Schwarz ed. 1991:67), and, like Tuttle, spoke of the need to see oneself in the work. Martin wrote:

What was the reaction of the person who first made a symmetrical house. He felt new contentment in the house. He could see that it reflected himself. He felt a satisfaction in having built it and perhaps an awareness of clarity in his mind as the means. A contentment with oneself that is success. Do not stop short of real contentment. You may as well never have been born if you remain discontented (Martin, *On the perfection underlying life*, in Schwarz ed. 1991:73).

Although Martin was giving a lecture to art students about painting at the time of that comment, she spoke of housebuilding as though it was a parallel activity. It prompted me to think that one correlation between different types of making could be the capacity it offers to access self-awareness. Further insight was available to clarify this, through a discussion of craft practice by Peter Korn (2013), who is a skilled furniture maker and teacher. His personal experience as a maker, and as someone within a community of other craftspeople, led him to assert that: 'There is a deep centredness in trusting one's hands, mind and imagination to work as a single, well-tuned instrument, a centredness that touches upon the very essence of fulfilment' (2013:53).

In skilled woodworking, Korn described a oneness between himself and his tools, and a sense of being 'not only in the world, but somehow of the world' (2013:53). He described an evolving knowledge of his tools and materials, where he becomes increasingly more responsive to the materials and his ability to shape them (2013:50-51).



His view is that in sharing the work with others, the artist lets go of the work, becoming open to inspiration once again. From what appears to be a contemplative perspective (see Chapter 2.1 and 2.4), he wrote that the more the artist is able to give, the more he is able to receive, so that there is a cyclical process whereby the artist receives inspiration. His experience led him to consider that the artist or maker is not detached from his community, but informed by and part of the conversations in that field (2013:157). This is important when I consider how practical knowledge can be shared in dialogue and art-making with others, and in the workshops that I organise (see Chapter 11.2).

The main points produced by this study are summarised on the following page. Although the points in this list are given in relation to Martin's practice, they also inform the development of my practice and how I share my artwork with others.

The main points produced by this comparison of building and making paintings for Martin and my practice:

- Making, in varied forms, can involve sustained or concentrated effort, decisiveness, and a single line of focused thought.
- Some aspects of Martin's work can be considered as laborious, and this applies to both heavy building work and meticulous art-making.
- Martin showed a high degree of manual dexterity in both housebuilding and art-making.
- Making can require 'practical wisdom' ('respect for traditional and local knowledge') together with a knowledge of tools, and responsiveness to the chosen materials.
- A tactile or sensuous knowledge can inform the construction of line and surface, and this links to touch and care in Martin's practice.
- Making invites an awareness of self, and, for Martin, produced an 'awareness of clarity of mind' and a sense of 'contentment' or fulfilment. Making can also enable 'self-expression'.
- 'Centredness' and fulfilment can come from the hands, mind and imagination working together as one, giving a sense of being 'of the world'.
- Martin communicated a sense of intimacy both through the attention she gave to building her home and in her art.

### Notes from my practice

Taos pueblo is built on an expansive flat and dusty area of orange-coloured earth surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo mountains, and is home to a settlement of native people. The traditional and environmentally-friendly method of making adobe bricks by hand is still used to maintain and add to existing homes, and I was able to see some smaller areas of construction during my visit in May 2016 (figs. 42-44). A guide explained that existing houses (fig. 45) are repaired and extended by family members. Families keep the same homes and new homes are not usually built, but any new building would need approval by a gathering of esteemed community members.

Many recently-built homes around Taos and Santa Fe now have a more hardwearing frame structure covered in stucco and a brown wash to give the look of adobe. Stucco is an exterior cement plaster wall-covering; a mix of sand, cement, lime and water. A local person told me anecdotally that, now, not many people know how to build with adobe, and there appears to have been a decline in everyday use of this method of construction. The close-knit community at Taos Pueblo, however, has continued to pass this practical knowledge down to each generation in order to maintain their homes. The decision to continue with adobe may also be tied to environmental concerns, as natural resources are important to the Puebloan people.

At the nearby San Francisco de Asis Mission Church (fig. 46), the congregation has an annual event where, for two weeks, adobe is reapplied to maintain the surface of the building, which quickly

deteriorates because it is susceptible to weather-damage, especially rain and wind. During this community event, a covering of adobe is applied as a finish and polished with sheepskin. One building adjacent to the church had not been preserved, so that the brick construction was visible after the surface covering had disintegrated. To maintain these traditional constructions, a fresh coating of adobe must be applied annually, or sometimes twice a year.

I am interested to find how 'practical wisdom' (see pages 70 and 75) can be passed on through the community by coming together in a shared activity. This affirmed to me that specialised or detailed practical knowledge could be understood and communicated both through making and in dialogue with other individuals. As an extension of that thinking, my workshops offer space for temporary communities of small groups of practitioners with shared interests to experiment through art-making and exchange practical knowledge.

Following pages: Photographs taken by Sharon Phelps at Taos Pueblo, New Mexico in May 2016

Fig. 42 Adobe bricks in a small area of construction at a family home

Fig. 43 A preparation area for adobe bricks, with wooden boards used during the making process, and a plastic covering laid over a mound of adobe

Fig. 44 A covered area for storing adobe and making bricks, adjacent to a family home

Fig. 45 A side view of a home at Taos Pueblo showing how wood poles, which are used as roof timbers and known as *vigas*, protrude through the adobe walls

Fig. 46 San Francisco de Asis Mission Church at Taos, where the congregation gathers annually to renew the adobe coating





#### 4.2 Navajo weave

Martin steadfastly maintained that her paintings were not like weave (Simon, 1996: 88–89). This was despite her close relationship with Lenore Tawney at Coenties Slip, and her exposure to the native culture of New Mexico, where there are many different types of Native American weave design. She had established a reputation in the field of painting, and it is possible that a connection to weave could have seemed detrimental. Since sewing has traditionally been regarded as an activity designated to women, both in the Navajo community and more generally, Martin may have been concerned that admitting a likeness between her grid paintings and stitching could downplay her role as a painter.

She was vehement in her denial. Replying to a suggestion by Joan Simon that her grids showed ‘an affinity with weaving’, Martin’s adamant response was: ‘Somebody undercutting me, saying it was like weaving. Do you think my paintings are like weaving?’ Simon addressed Martin’s dissent by offering: ‘Though, as we were saying earlier, just because you knew [Tawney’s] work and the person doesn’t mean that there is necessarily an influence. Rosenquist also lived at Coenties Slip’ (Simon, 1996: 88–89). This last assertion supposed that a male artist could also be in contact with weave, but that this contact was not assumed to have had an influence on his art practice.

When Anna Chave reflected on the significant achievements in Martin’s painting career (in Haskell ed. 1992:132–135), she observed that Martin was one of only a few female artists to be represented by the Pace Gallery in New York. Chave wrote that critics had been generally favourable to Martin’s paintings, but suggested that this was perhaps because Martin did not exhibit until she had first established herself at Betty Parsons Gallery. That gallery had a reputation for showing Abstract Expressionist artists, and had already exhibited Newman and Rothko. Chave argued that feminist art historians had little need to champion Martin, since she had established a successful career on her own terms. She proposed that Martin’s geometry was seen differently by critics. It was perceived to be intuitive, even though it could attract the same critical language that was applied to her male counterparts. Their employment of geometric forms, like that of Martin, suggested rigour and logic (Chave, in Haskell ed. 1992:132–135). However, it is



Martin's capacity to also act intuitively, and to reflect on nature, that made me think it worthwhile to put aside her concerns. This opens up the possibility in which to consider Navajo weave as one influence on her paintings.

In order to make this comparison, I have drawn on the research and knowledge of textile researchers Roseann Willink and Paul Zolbrod, who conducted a large-scale project, where Navajo weavers were asked to interpret traditional weave designs. The researchers wrote that the Navajo designs 'speak metaphorically and symbolically', but that this symbolism is extended by adding small particles, like seed or feather into the fabric of the textile (1996:9-10). Dore Ashton wrote that Martin was exposed to Hopi and Navajo artefacts from when she settled in New Mexico in the 1940s (Hayward Gallery, 1977:7). While traditional Navajo weave operates symbolically, I have attempted to discover how this might compare with Martin's painting.

Ashton claimed that Martin's work fits 'the tradition of analogy' of the nineteenth century, 'filtered' through 'Mondrian, Kandinsky and Klee', and made a comparison with romantic poetry, as a 'system of equivalences' (Hayward Gallery, 1977:14). I have attempted to discover whether the symbolism of traditional Navajo weave can be compatible with a reading of Martin's paintings. This comparison does not intend a complete match between weave and Martin's paintings, but, instead, has attempted to examine the possibility of a shared vision.

When Victoria King visited Martin for her PhD research in 2002, King also made a connection between the New Mexico landscape and the geometric patterning found on Navajo pottery and woven textiles:

At Galisteo [in 1977], Martin built her adobe dwelling next to the remains of an ancient adobe that was twelve-foot square; twice the dimensions of her once preferred six-foot square canvas size. Decorated Navajo pottery shards are frequently found when walking on this land. Their geometrical designs, like those of Navajo woven rugs and blankets, resonate with local landforms, particularly the step formation of the mesa. [Martin lived here for sixteen years until 1993, moving back to Taos at the age of 81]  
(Victoria King, *Art of place and displacement: embodied perception and the haptic ground*, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, Australia, 2005)



In my investigation, I describe how Martin's grid paintings share with traditional Navajo weave an all-over muted geometric patterning with subtle and intricate detailing, and that both Martin and the Navajo were trying to convey order, beauty and harmony. I also discuss how in both cases, there is an apparent symmetry, while purposely allowing imperfection and slight irregularity. A particular example of Martin's painting is given, *The Islands* (1961) (fig. 48, page 85), and this is to show how the painting resembles a weave on a traditional Navajo loom. I describe how a large traditional weave is built up by joining smaller sections, because this is the most practical method for the weaver, and how this is like Martin drawing lines across large paintings by using a ruler to draw one section at a time. In my practice, I present two examples from my investigation of 'lazy line', which is the diagonal edge left on a smaller section of weave. This edge is so that the weaver can make a strong join onto the next section.

Willink and Zolbrod invited Navajo weavers to comment on different examples of textile in the collections of the museums of New Mexico, and found that a Navajo saddle blanket (fig. 47) made between 1940 – 1960 drew more comments and praise than other weaves. It was less colourful, less pictorial and more regular in overall design. The researchers were told that it showed a deep knowledge of traditional ways, and while they could see no fixed scheme of variation, an experienced weaver was able to confirm that the visual rhythm in the textile matched the rhythm of sung or spoken prayer. Qualities that drew admiration from the weavers included tightness of weave and its detailed understated intricacy (1996:94).



Fig. 47 Navajo saddle blanket (probably ceremonial) 1940 – 1960, 56 x 93 inches. Image: Willink and Zolbrod, 1996

Navajo traditional culture places emphasis on maintaining a state which combines order, beauty, balance and harmony (Willink and Zolbrod, 1996:13); themes which are common throughout Martin's art. The all-over patterning of their traditional weave gives an impression of ordered regularity with little differentiation of colour or tone. In the example shown, fig. 47, no single feature dominates above others in the brown honeycomb-like design. Of the different types of Navajo patterning, many with strong colours and dynamic forms, what is striking about this piece is the similarity to Martin's restrained and carefully worked grid compositions, with muted colour. In Navajo weave, small imperfections and subtle changes of design and colour are intentionally woven, thereby breaking the apparent symmetry. In this way, the weaver can establish a sense of order, but also adheres to a belief that imperfection is necessary for the continuation of a dynamic living world, in which creation occurs through a cycle of birth and death.

This ordering also reflects a desire to balance internal harmony with a greater external harmony (Willink and Zolbrod, 1996:5,12).

In Martin's paintings, small irregularities and asymmetry are not obvious, but can be seen on close inspection. Often there is a rhythmic scheme that contributes a sense of harmony. Slight changes of pressure and breaks in pencil-drawn lines, bleeds of ink at the ends of ruled lines, and washes of paint that run over demarcated limits, indicate that the perfection Martin sought as an ideal also allowed her to use methods that could accommodate imperfection too. Martin's writings state that perfection is only available in the mind, although we may experience 'moments of perfection'. She wrote that: 'Our representations of inspiration are far from perfect, for perfection is unobtainable and unattainable' (Martin, *Reflections*, in Schwarz ed. 1991:31).



Fig. 48 Agnes Martin, *The Islands* (1961), acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Image [www.wikiart.org](http://www.wikiart.org) © Agnes Martin

One of Martin's compositions in particular, *The Islands* (1961) (fig. 48), compares with weave. It is a six-foot square painting with a central grid drawn in graphite on a light brown painted ground. Wide margins are contained within a thin cream-white line. A mesh of pencil lines extends out beyond the rows of cream dashes of oil paint, which resemble tufts pulled through the surface of a weave. There are dark markings or dots along the outer edges of the canvas which align the grid, but which also resemble tiny holes. These dots cannot be seen on the image, but I observed them when I looked

closely at the painting when it was exhibited at Tate Modern, London in 2015. The narrow painted line bordering the grid resembles the rod frame used by Navajo weavers. Traditional Navajo looms consist of a simple, sturdy frame, often made from tree trunks, and are worked on in an upright position. The top and bottom edges of a weaving are twined to a rod. To suit a nomadic lifestyle, the warp (usually wool) is prepared off the loom on a frame and then placed onto the loom, so that a weaving can be removed and travel to a new place. When re-located, the weaver builds another loom and places the weaving on it so that it can be continued. Tufts of fleece are placed between the warp threads to mark spacing for the pattern, and then removed as the weaving progresses. There are no pictures in the coloured weave, and to achieve symmetry the design is duplicated in each corner of the rug to meet at the middle. This example gives clear evidence of Navajo weave's influence on Martin, despite her strenuous denials.

Individual sections of weave are made at a time and fastened together later, with joins that are built up along a diagonal edge. The join is called a 'lazy line', and this is explored through my practice (figs. 49-51). A thread passed from the centre of the weave to the outer edge is known as a Weaver's Pathway or Spirit Line. This is removed when the weave is complete, so that the weaver releases her energy and spirit in order to create the next weave (<http://www.mirrixlooms.com/an-introduction-to-navajo-weaving/>). The broken line of the weft is determined by what is practical for the weaver. It is close to the process employed by Martin for her ruled lines, where a ruler was moved at intervals across the surface of a six feet square canvas. A long straight edge would have pressed into the surface of the canvas, causing the pencil line to become distorted. Instead, each section of ruled line joins another. The broken line of the weave also resembles the uneven line created when graphite is drawn across the textured surface of a painting.

### Notes from my practice

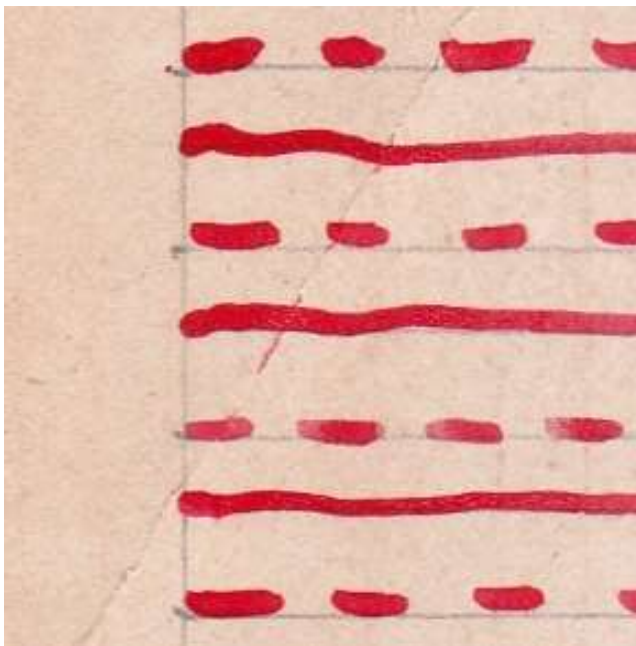
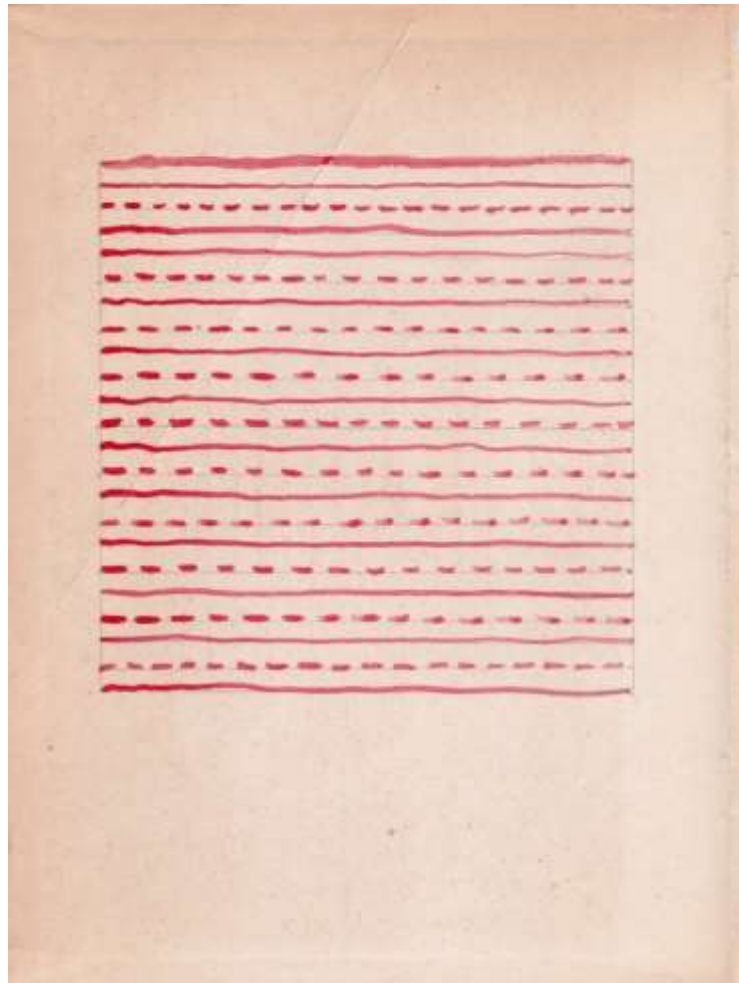
When I visited New Mexico in May 2016 I was particularly keen to see examples of 'lazy line', and imagined that I would see obvious join lines between sections of weave. I visited a small textile workroom in Taos, where the weaver specialised in re-producing original weave designs, but on a large wooden loom. There were original Navajo woven textiles displayed on the wall, that were large blankets with bold designs in strong colours. I was told that in a traditional blanket, the weaver sits to make small individual sections by working from the bottom of each piece attached to a small loom construction and finishing at the top with a diagonal edge. The weaver could then move along to the next section. Continuation along a diagonal edge is necessary to make the join stronger. Examples of 'lazy line' were pointed out to me on the old traditional blankets. On close inspection, the diagonal joins are visible, but not obvious, and could be mistaken for a light fold in the fabric. I examined a beige-brown textile and another strong red design. I was particularly intrigued by the red thread, because of the historical use of the colour, where captive Navajo women re-used thread unravelled from soldier's red clothing.

Following pages: 'Lazy line' examined through my practice:

Fig. 49 *Untitled* (2016), Graphite and watercolour paint on old paper showing a folded 'lazy line' on the top left corner. 20.5 x 15.5cm. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 50 Detail showing a slight bleed into the folded line

Fig. 51 *Untitled* (2016), Graphite and watercolour paint on paper, with a pre-existing crease in the paper. 17 x 11cm. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps







**In the first work** (fig. 49), I have considered that lines on Tantric diagrams are completed in one flow and in one sitting, so that the paint is stronger on the left edge as it is first applied with a thin brush, but becomes lighter as the brush moves across the paper. I became aware that I was holding a single breath as I drew the brush across the paper to make each line. Some of the lines are broken, reflecting the idea of weave. When I made this work I was aware that the word 'Tantra' could also mean 'loom' or 'weave' (Chapter 2.4, page 33). One corner of the paper was folded prior to applying pencil line and paint, resembling the appearance of 'lazy line' as a light fold. The paper was taken from a very old book, and as I folded it some of the fibres tore slightly. When I examined the painted lines, I saw that a tiny amount of paint had seeped into the diagonal line where the fibres tore. The slight accidental bleed is very thin and almost unnoticeable, but more closely resembles my experience of seeing 'lazy line', as the viewer's gaze would need to be directed towards the faint line.

**In the second work** (fig. 51), I selected an already creased page from an old book, so that a fold was already present, running at a slight diagonal down the centre of the paper. I drew a square with pencil in the middle of the page across the fold, with a drawn line also running down the centre. I filled the square with red watercolour paint, so that it was brushed across the fold. The vertical pencil-drawn line was a device to centre the square as it sits on a diagonal fold, and was a compositional aid for the drawing process. It appears quite dark because it is not a single line, but several overlapping lines. The outer

limit of the square similarly has several lines rather than a single line. This was because as I tried to align the square I was placing it within an irregular shape, and required several attempts. Since my study of Martin has shown that irregularities are left in her paintings, I have not tried to erase the corrections. My investigation suggested that this type of 'imperfection' contributes to the subtle inflections in her surfaces. Although she worked with geometry, the lines and marks are never rigid. In my artwork, there is a thin unpainted area just inside the edge of the fold, where paint flowed over the folded edge but did not go under it. It felt quite clumsy applying paint to fill a small area, and the work looks simple, but required my focused attention (see Chapters 2.1 and 2.4).

### **The Agnes Martin Gallery**

Martin was involved in the design of a gallery at the Harwood Museum, Taos, to house a permanent collection of her paintings. She donated seven untitled six-foot square paintings made between 1993 and 1994 to be exhibited in the octagonal space, where the eighth wall is an entryway (fig. 52). Four box-like yellow seats fabricated by Donald Judd are placed in the centre, facing out towards the paintings. An oculus, a round window in the ceiling, filters natural light. When I visited the gallery in May 2016, I saw at first-hand how changing light affects the perception of Martin's lightly-drawn pencil lines and thin washes of acrylic paint. Not only is there a change in the level of natural light from morning to night, but, because the light comes from above, it fluctuates as clouds pass over. As the light fades, bands of colour and pencil lines disappear, leaving only the pale surfaces of the paintings.

The special consideration given to changes in natural light was associated in my mind with my visit to Dia:Beacon in May 2013 (see Chapter 6.1). At Dia, natural light comes down through slanted windows close to the ceiling, producing certain perceptual effects (see page 124). These careful lighting arrangements were somewhat repeated in Martin's studio in Taos. She had a long rectangular window in the ceiling directly above the painting area. Martin's attention to the perceptual effects offered by continued changes in natural light on her paintings may have shown her understanding of how a viewer engages with subtle nuances of surface. At the Harwood gallery, I drew close to observe pencil lines and pale washes of colour on individual paintings, but sat on the benches in the centre of the gallery, or stood back in the

entryway, to watch the effects of shifting light across all paintings. This setting invites a contemplative state by echoing the natural rhythm of light changing between night and day. Because these changes happen slowly over time, I experienced a mesmerising or calming effect.

Facing page:

Fig. 52 Two views of the Agnes Martin gallery at the Harwood Museum in May 2016, Photographs Sharon Phelps



My studies for this chapter centred on how the culture of New Mexico informed Martin's practice. I found out more about two traditional methods particular to that area; building with adobe and logs, and Navajo weave. My comparisons suggested that her art practice was not only meditative, but also practical. I have suggested that at the Harwood Museum, Martin purposely created certain perceptual effects by choosing a ceiling design with an oculus, and that in her studio nearby at Taos, there was a long window above the painting area where there would also have been changes of natural light. In Chapter 5, I examine some other perceptual effects that have been described in existing writing about Martin. At the end of the following chapter, I set out the different parts of her practice in relation to each other.

### Chapter 5: Agnes Martin's grid paintings and their analogy with nature

In this chapter, I further examine the development of Martin's practice, giving examples of her experimentation with constructions of found objects (see Chapter 3). I then elucidate how these informed later decisions about how to make grid paintings, and go on to investigate some of their perceptual effects. Dore Ashton argued that we can best interpret Martin's paintings in terms of a relation to nature (Hayward Gallery 1977:14). I explore how the intricate surfaces of grids can re-enact the experience of nature through close arrangements of delicate line. Later in this thesis (see Chapter 10), I make a comparison with the 'organic' lines created by Lygia Clark in her *Bicho* sculptures, which she made around 1960. In that same chapter, Martin's delicate lines are also contrasted with wire net-like installations made by Venezuelan artist Gego. This present chapter closes with a diagram to show a chronology of different types of making in Martin's practice, so that the grid paintings are situated within the development of her work.

Christina Bryan Rosenberger's research centres on technique and technical detail to provide insights into the materiality of Martin's practice. Rosenberger described Martin's construction *Kali* (1958) (fig. 53), in which discarded wood pegs, painted in oils, are pushed into a wood support. She wrote that Martin later reproduced the effects of the shadows cast between the protruding surface of the pegs and the wood support by drawing graphite circles around painted circular forms, as in the painting *Night Harbor* (1960) (fig. 54). In this way, the light-reflective quality of graphite has an effect of lifting the circular forms, while colour and spacing in the painting replace the pegs and also generate rhythm (*A Sophisticated Economy of Means: Agnes Martin's Materiality*, in Cooke ed. 2011:108-9). Although Martin painted over the taut wires in her construction *Water* (1958) (shown earlier in fig.19), when unpainted, the metallic wires would have been like the graphite lines of the grid paintings that replaced them.



Fig. 53 Agnes Martin, *Kali* (1958) Oil on wood, 27.9 x 29.2 x 12.1cm (11 x 11.5 x 4.8 inches)  
Photograph ©Agnes Martin

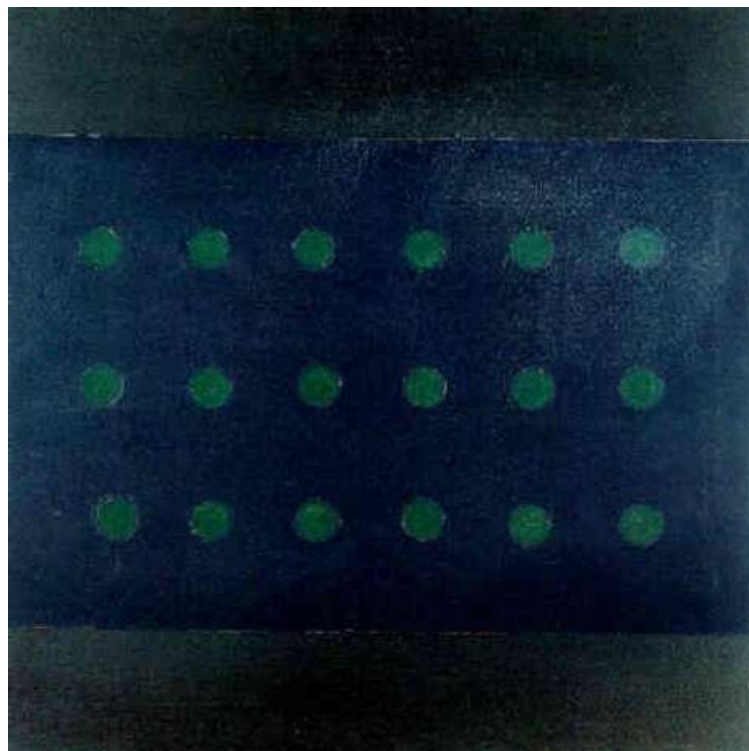


Fig. 54 Agnes Martin, *Night Harbor* (1960) Oil on canvas, 25 x 25 inches (63.5 x 63.5cm)  
Photograph ©Agnes Martin



Although the grids can be perceived as simple in structure, they required labour-intensive calculation of interval and measured placement of line. Ann Wilson, an artist at Coenties Slip, wrote:

There are measuring tapes which she [Martin] herself has made for each painting hanging on a nail on her painting wall beside a T-square. These marked canvas tapes, the rulers she makes for each canvas, are clear in their simplicity. In her drawings, a form is made up of measured lines (Wilson, *Linear Webs*, Art and Artists, October 1966:47).

In a documentary film made by Mary Lance in 2003, Martin worked on large sheets of paper covered in calculations. The ratio for scaling up paintings from a small image in her mind was worked out in fractions of an inch. Intense concentration and physical effort would have been required to plot out the placement of line and interval. The finely marked interior divisions of the grid paintings, an 'incised tracery' (Wilson.1966:46), can suggest natural patterns. Kasha Linville described the phenomenal effects of Martin's paintings of the 1960s (see Appendix A, page 267). She wrote that the paintings 'came into being almost as natural objects', and '...it is the surprise of discovering the veining of a leaf, a dry forest, a winter beach, in a picture that has no image. You can drop through her paintings into the memory of sensation' (*Artforum*, June 1971:72).

Linville's account suggests an organic equivalence to the grid paintings, which on a small scale could be like the intricate veins of a leaf, or, on a larger scale, a tightly packed area of trees and branches. (See my further references to organic line in Chapter 10.1, Lygia Clark). When curator Michael Auping had a conversation with Martin on 16 May 1997 about the inclusion of her painting *Leaf*(1965) (fig. 55) in an exhibition at The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, she explained: 'Simplicity is never simple. It's the hardest thing to achieve, from the standpoint of the East. I'm not sure the West understands simplicity'. Auping interpreted 'her quiet gestures and numinous colours' as a 'distillation of the intuitive beauty and perfection inherent in nature and the mind' (Auping. Internet: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth).

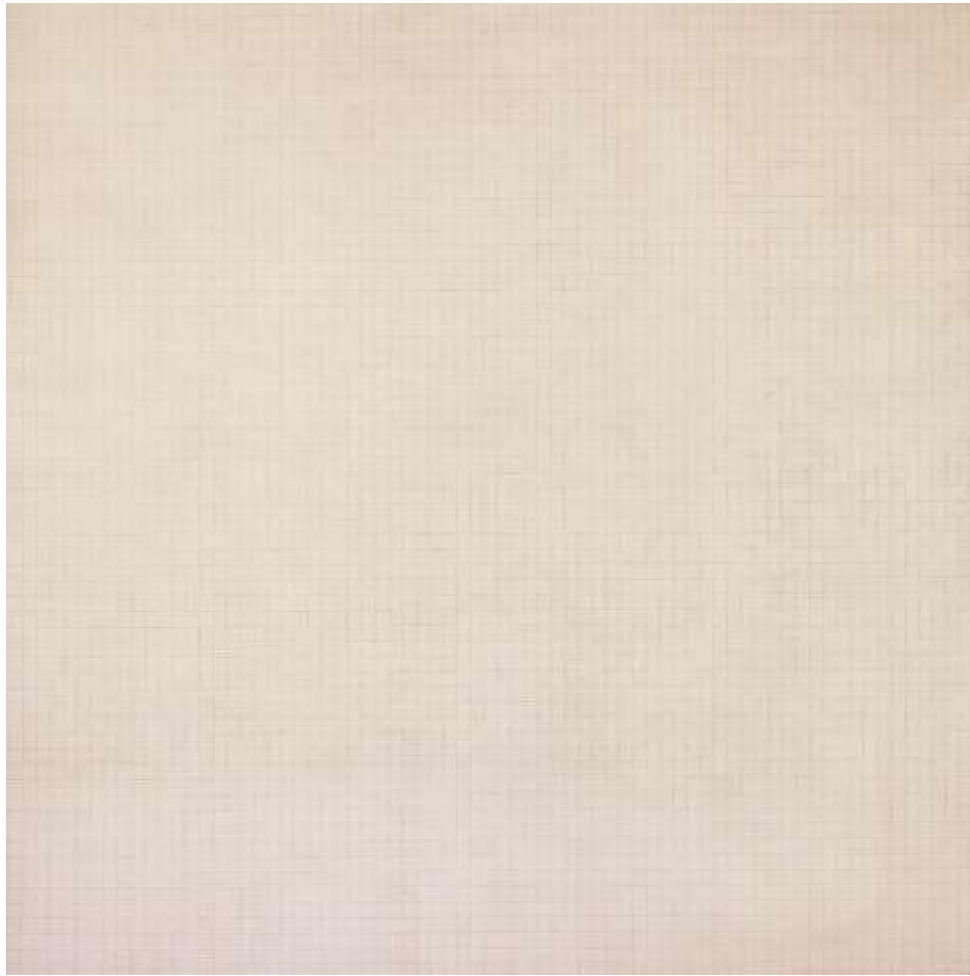


Fig. 55 Agnes Martin, *Leaf*(1965), Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 1/16 x 72 1/8 inches.  
Photograph: The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth ©Agnes Martin

One of Martin's early grid paintings, after she stopped using found objects, was called *The Tree* (1964) (fig. 56). She explained how this arrangement of parallel lines represents innocence: 'When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then this grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do, and so I painted it and then I was satisfied. I thought, this is my vision' (Agnes Martin, interview by Suzan Campbell, May 15, 1989, transcript in Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.). The subtle visual effects of this painting led to its inclusion in William C. Seitz's *The Responsive Eye* at MOMA, New York in 1965; an exhibition in which works were displayed because of the perceptual experience they presented to the viewer (Seitz, in press release for MOMA, 25 February 1965). Art critic Lawrence Alloway described Martin's paintings as diffuse surfaces, almost dissolved. He observed that:

As she draws it, the grid is half-way between a rectangular system of coordinates and a veil. It is put down in pencil so that the network consists of marks far less clearly given than we are accustomed to in American painting with its usual standard of high emphasis and unrelieved clarity. Thus the grid, though tight, does not close the surface, but establishes an open plane, identified with the surface of the picture but accumulating sufficient differences to suggest, for all its regularity, a veil, a shadow, a bloom.

(Lawrence Alloway, *Agnes Martin*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1973: 9)

The fine mesh of lines in *The Tree* draws the viewer close to the surface. This approaches being paradoxical, since Martin's paintings do not clamour for attention. The invitation to closeness warrants further attention, and is discussed in Chapter 9. I have experienced how her lightly applied grids can quietly fade into the background in a room containing bold or brightly coloured artworks. The grid of lightly woven graphite lines is resistant to attempts at representation by photographic means, making it imperative to see and experience the actual artwork. Curator Heinz Liesbrock described a 'pictorial vocabulary that she [Martin] had been developing since the 1960s', writing that the individual and delicate, but mutually dependant, components of Martin's surfaces dissolve and become integrated into the overall structure (Growe and Liesbrock ed. in Josef Albers Museum, 2004:36).

Our contemplation leads us not into an indeterminate, romantic distance, but directly to the fact of the picture. There we meet the inseparable whole, in which the individuality of the single forms is preserved. It is a matter of form, form represented in a state of formlessness, and a matter of concealment and simultaneously of revelation (in Ulrike Growe and Heinz Liesbrock ed. in Josef Albers Museum, 2004:42)

He proposed that Martin's 'inner sense of composition', or intuitive sensibility, did not obey rules to make fixed arrangements of line and colour. He argued that, as the borders in Albers' *Homage to the Square* group of paintings dissolve in the process of viewing, so do the separate forms in Martin's grid paintings, so that what the viewer perceives is their 'visual interrelation' (Growe and Liesbrock ed. in Josef Albers Museum, 2004:40).

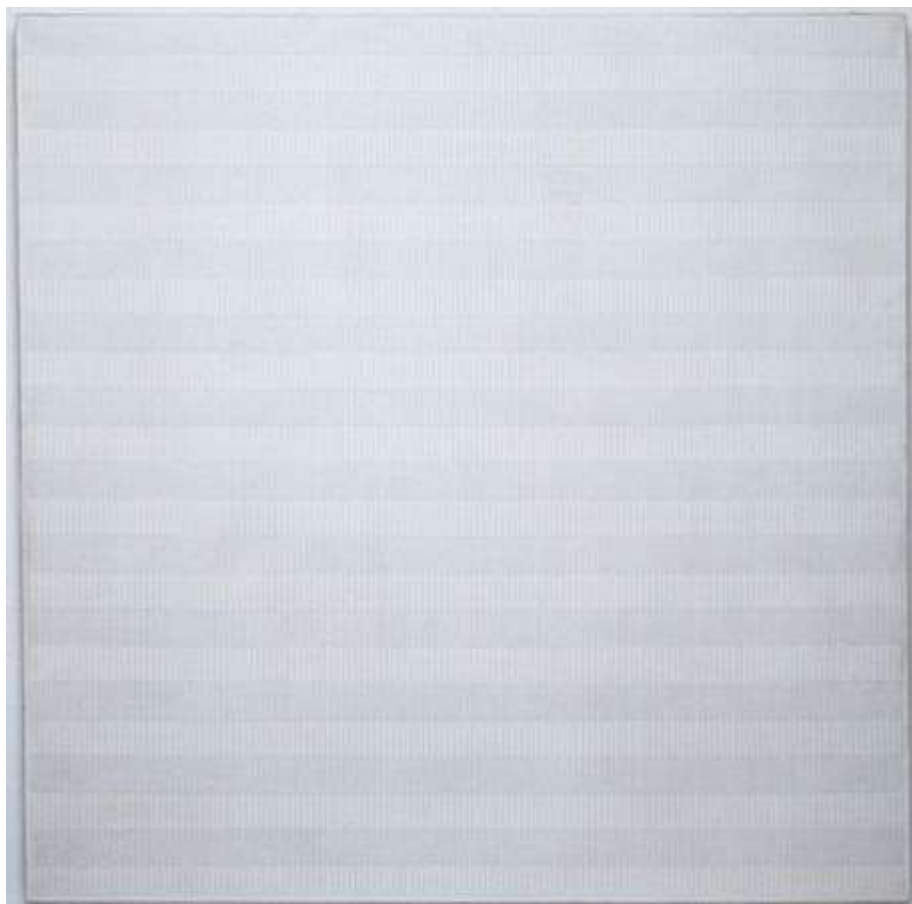


Fig. 56 *The Tree* (1964) Oil and pencil on canvas, 6 x 6 feet (182.8 x 182.8cm) Photograph Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund. © 2008 Estate of Agnes Martin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

### Notes from my practice

When I visited Dia:Beacon in May 2013, I studied an untitled painting from 1959, in which Martin had scored a grid through the oil paint with the point of a pencil (see fig.67, page 118). This led me to apprehend the lines of her grids as incised markings or impressions. When I later looked closely at her pencil-drawn grids at Dia:Beacon and Tate (Chapter 6), I observed that graphite lines are sometimes softly inscribed *into* the surface, and can be dissolved into the paint. At the Tate exhibition in June 2015, another untitled painting, from 1960, had lines scored through the paint, but also with pairs of small marks in each space (fig. 23, page 52).

In my practice, I experimented to find a different type of incised line or impression. I have described earlier how some of my new artworks involve the re-assembly of old books. I make a choice of particular covers and retrieve the blank end pages (see page 36). A number of the book covers and pages have a 'patina', or discolouration, and this was often a reason for my selection of those materials. Some end-pages had pre-existing personal handwritten messages which give them an intimate feel. I made work with paper that had slight inscriptions, but did not use any paper with heavy areas of printed text or too much handwriting because this could distract focus away from the drawn marks.

As well as being a ground or surface, the covers and pages can provide visual starting points for the work. In the artwork shown in figs. 57 and 58, the green book cover has an existing design impressed into the

surface that depicts stone columns in ancient architecture. The book title and author's name is similarly impressed within a rectangle on top of the columns. The design is more easily visible when positioned under raking light. I experienced this to be similar to examples of porcelain where the design is applied under a clear glaze (see Anhua technique in Appendix A – MRes Arts Practice thesis page 269).

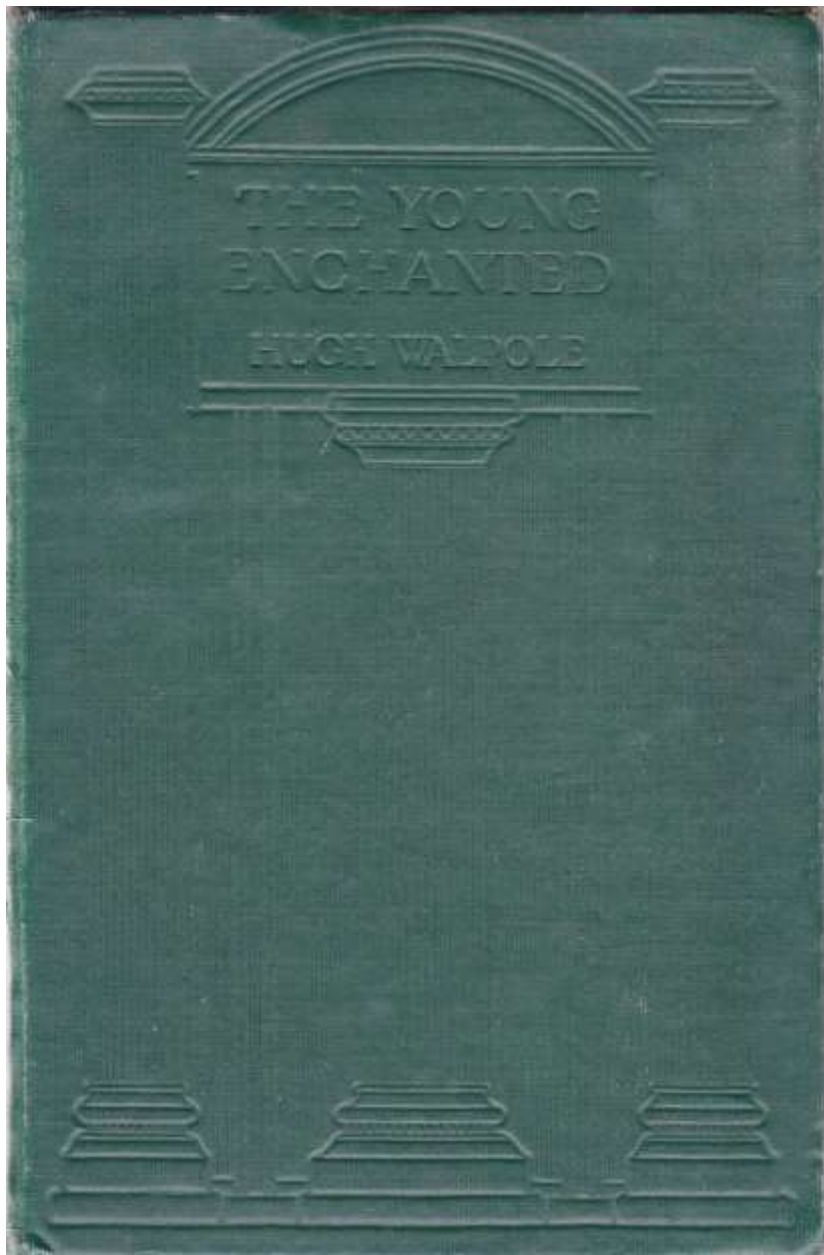
The cover design was selected as a readymade grid of incised lines, but the content of the book also had an impact on my decision-making, because the author mentioned a forest in his narrative, with connotations of nature like that of Martin's grids. My bands of softly-pencilled green colour on the blank end-page (fig. 57) make reference to the forest described by the author. The green shading and the graphite lines which contain it are softly 'dissolved' into the mottled and discoloured surface of the paper, so that the drawing becomes an inseparable part of the materiality of the stained paper.

This artwork was selected for inclusion in the Royal Scottish Academy Open Exhibition, in Edinburgh, 28 November 2015 – 14 February 2016. My instructions for display indicated that the curators could choose how to position the work, and that it could be wall-mounted, propped on a shelf or laid flat in a cabinet. They chose to include it with objects, placed flat inside a waist-height cabinet with a glass top. In a workshop context this artwork is available to be picked up (see Chapter 11).

Following pages:

Figs. 57-58 *Forest* (2015), Two views of one artwork, Pencil on paper and book cover, 19.5 x 13cm. Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps







For the purpose of making the columns (in fig. 58) more readily visible in an image, I gently rubbed a graphite stick over paper taken from another book, which was placed on top of the cover design (fig. 59). One side of the paper has fine lines of light brown discolouration, running vertically down the page, and this side was purposely not shaded so that the lines could be seen (fig.60).

Carefully working downwards from the top left corner with the soft graphite held at an angle, while also pressing firmly on the surface to hold the paper in place, I was surprised (and irritated) when the paper shifted slightly. I continued shading across the surface after realigning the paper, but there were already obvious signs where the paper had slipped and produced misalignment almost half way down the right edge (fig. 59).

Reflecting on its appearance after I had completed the entire cover, I realised that carefulness must be balanced with practical understanding about how materials, tools and people interact. I thought of Peter Korn's writing, when he described woodworking. He wrote that each tool must be used in the correct orientation. When he described incising lines into wood, he spoke of 'understanding the mechanics of marking tools'.

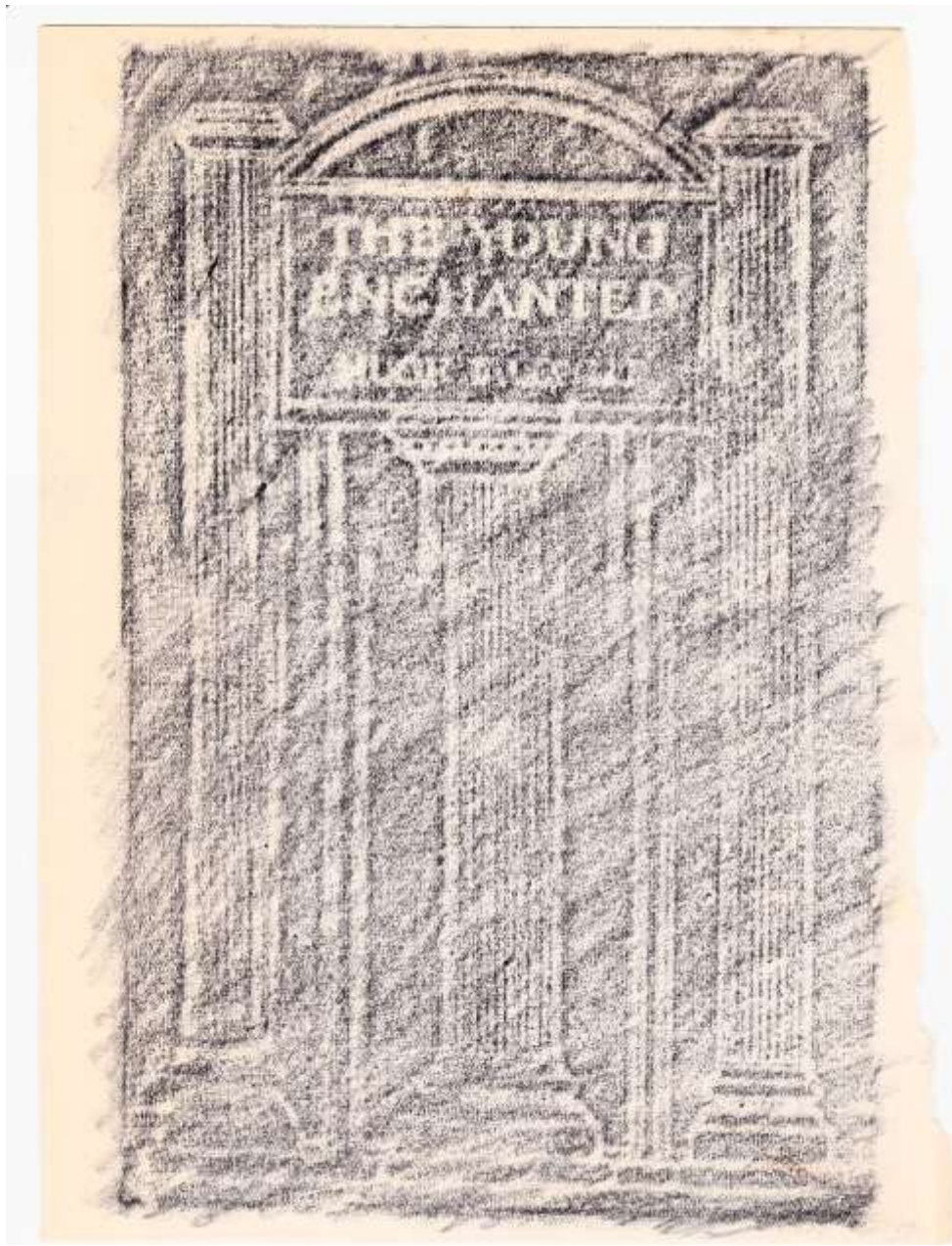
During the many years I cut every mortise by hand, I would mark out the shoulders with a knife and square, then scribe the cheeks with a mortise gauge. In both cases I was incising lines onto wood, but there was a logic to using different tools. A knife tip severs wood fibers cleanly across the grain. The pins of the gauge do pretty much the opposite. They tear wood fibers crudely across the grain, but leave precise tracks within the grain (Korn, 2015:50).

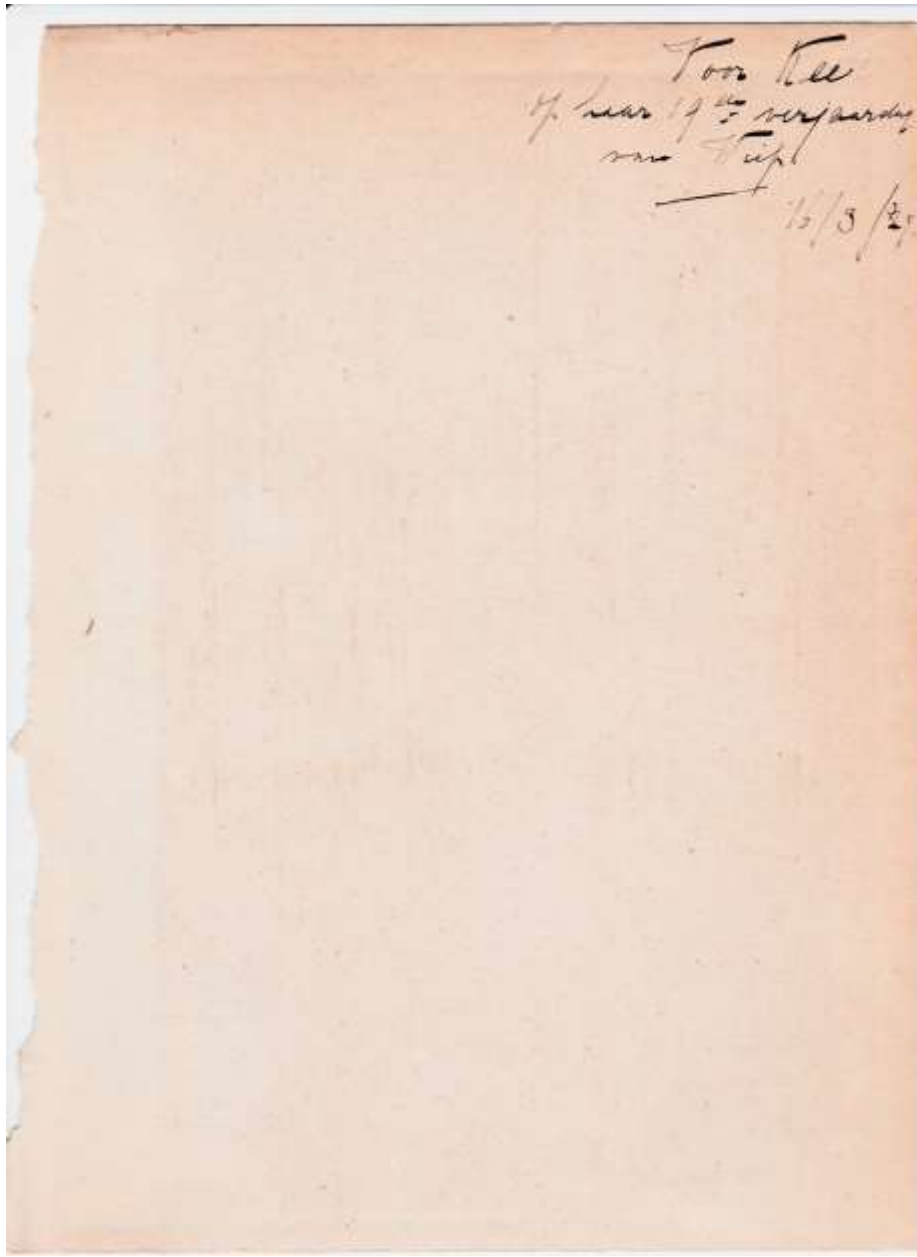
My simple exercise of shading across some paper with graphite reinforced my understanding that the practical experience of doing something is the real test, since it circumvents imagined outcomes. The unexpected result this time is that far from showing a clear image of the columns in the cover design, the new drawing makes the pillars appear to dissolve. The new drawing comprises irregular edges and the uneven application of graphite, but these types of marks were anticipated from my earlier use of a soft graphite stick. However, what was not foreseen was that when the paper shifted, the paired thin bands either side of the central pillar appeared as three dissolved bands. This can be seen just above the middle of the drawing. Since the book page is quite old, the artwork has a dry papery feel and the texture prompted me to think of some types of leaf in nature.

Following pages:

Fig. 59 Graphite drawing on paper, 2017. 20.5 x 15cm. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 60 The other side of the same drawing shows handwriting in the top right corner, and existing discolouration of the paper with faint vertical lines





**The development of Agnes Martin's grid paintings**

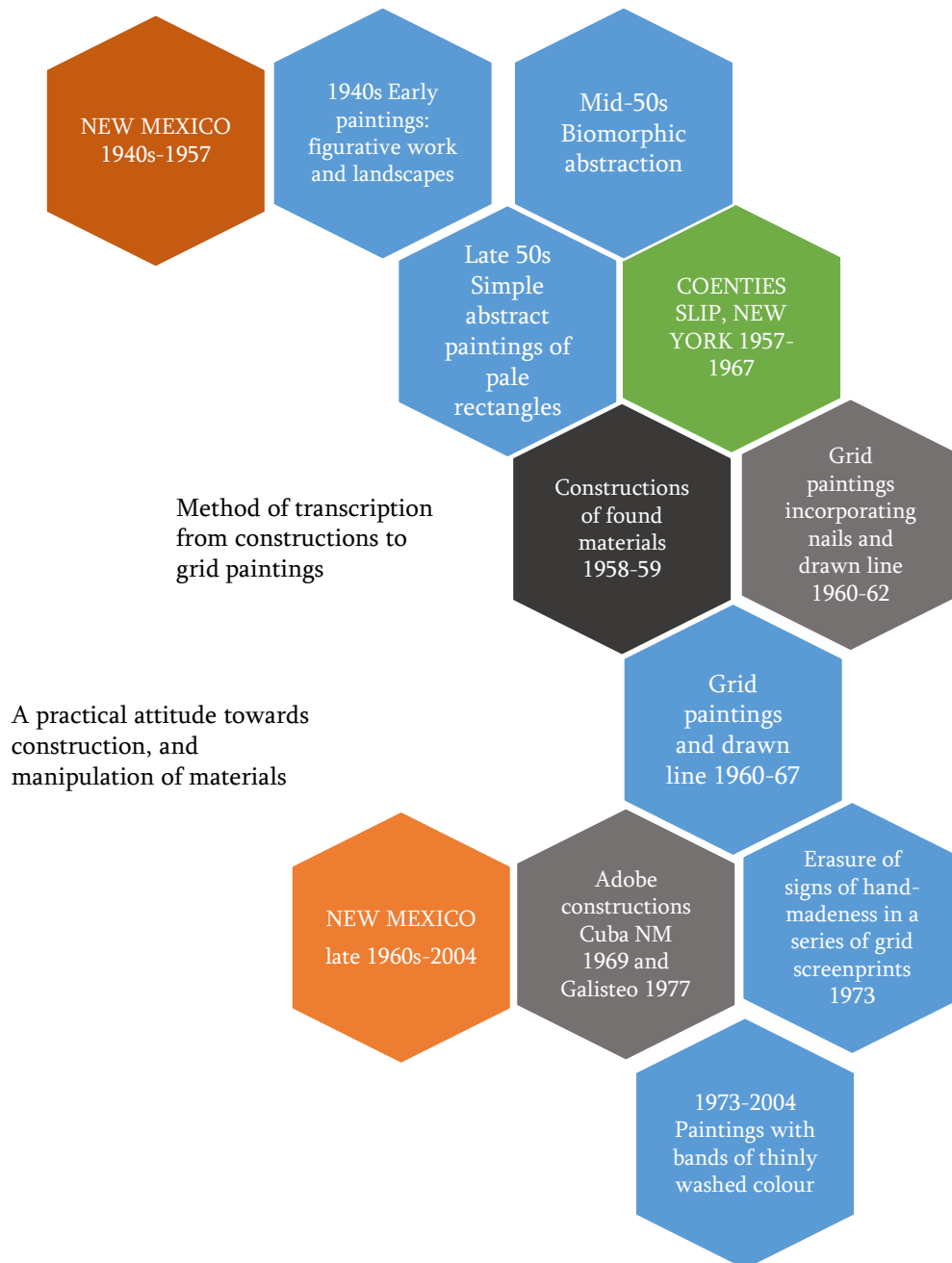


Fig. 61 Sharon Phelps: A diagram to show the chronology of different types of making in Agnes Martin's practice

## Summary

This chapter described further examples of transcription, a method that was also examined in Martin's practice in Chapter 3, and when I made new work based on the objects found at Vauxhall slipway. In Martin's work *Kali*, the shadows produced by the pegs were represented in her other paintings by circles of graphite, and I pointed out a resemblance between the stretched wire in Martin's constructions and drawn graphite line. At the same time, I also remarked on the sheen of both types of material. When re-enacting this in my art-making, I replicated Martin's practice of using found materials, but also employed methods of selection and placement. My observation that Martin had marked out some grids by incising through the paint led me to make an artwork where I selected a book cover with a grid-like design of impressed lines (fig.57). A linear composition that I drew on the end paper (fig. 58), shaded with bands of green pencil, suggested an organic quality.

In the exercise that followed (fig.59), making a graphite impression of the book cover (fig.57) produced certain perceptual effects. As well as being a diffuse surface, produced by lightly rubbing back and forth with soft graphite stick, there was an unexpected outcome. The incised design on the book cover was partially dissolved, but also distorted because of the slippage of the paper. There is some debate about whether Martin intended irregularity in her surfaces, and material differences are often mentioned in existing writing as a contributing factor in the perception of Martin's work. Some writers have inferred that subtle differences were intentional, and in her technical research Rosenberger wrote that Martin made deliberate choices of support to achieve an increased sense of depth, where reflective qualities of the graphite are emphasised. She deduced that the roughness of support was a strategy employed by Martin to increase the occurrence of irregularities (Rosenberger, in Cooke ed. 2011:105-107). My observation through making new practice is that small unintentional differences can often occur because the materials behave in accordance with their properties and despite the intention of the maker. In Chapter 6, I give further instances where I have responded to Martin's artworks in my practice, and discuss the insights produced by my close observation of her work.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Responses to Martin's artworks through my practice**

Prior to this research, I had looked in detail at Martin's paintings in an exhibition at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (15 May – 11 July 2010) and at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London (21 April – 21 May 2010), and these visits informed my decision-making about conducting research on Agnes Martin. During preliminary research for this study (see Appendix A) I also visited the Tate store, London, in 2012 to see examples of Martin's paintings. The first step in my methodology, which is set out in full in Chapter 12, is to decide on a particular focus, and in my research this is the point of transition in Martin's practice from the constructions at the end of the 1950s into grid paintings. Two further steps of my methodology are described in this chapter, and these are to detail my first-hand observations of Martin's artworks, and then to make a practical analysis through my own art-making.

I visited a permanent collection of Martin's paintings at Dia:Beacon, New York in 2013, and a retrospective of her work, at Tate Modern, London, in 2015. At Dia, I examined Martin's paintings in relation to the work of other artists in the collection. The exhibition of Martin's work at Tate Modern (3 June and 11 October 2015) included a number of Martin's constructions. These are works which question the boundaries of painting by being object-like, and seeing them alongside Martin's paintings was key to understanding the development of her grids. My first-hand accounts of Martin's artworks are followed by a commentary on my practice, showing how I experimented with her methods to produce new work.

### 6.1 Dia: Beacon, New York

Dia has a permanent collection of Martin's paintings, which I first visited in May 2013, and again in May 2016. The former Nabisco packaging factory is more than an hour by train from New York, and requires a dedicated trip along the Hudson Valley. Dia presents this journey as providing a transition from the busy environment of the city to a tranquil and contemplative space for viewing art (Cooke, L. and M. Govan ed. 2003: 33). Gallery buildings are adjacent to the river and surrounded by open grounds and trees. Dia's large and spacious building has several floors and houses an in-depth collection of selected major artists from the 1960s. The collection reflects the art foundation's policy to show land artists and artworks that are not easily shown in the confines of a gallery (Cooke, L. and M. Govan ed. 2003: 11-12).

Each artist's work is displayed in separate galleries, in consultation with the artists about decisions on suitable spaces. A changing display of Martin's paintings is hung in two interconnecting galleries (figs. 62 and 63). One gallery has a group of eight large acrylic paintings made for Dia in 1999, with thin bands of pale colour, collectively titled *Innocent Love*. In the adjoining space, Martin's paintings from the 1950s show a progression from spare arrangements of pale geometric forms into the more defined grid compositions; works which brought her recognition in the 1960s.

*The Spring* (1958) (fig. 64) was painted shortly after Martin's arrival at Coenties Slip. It is an example of her simple arrangements of light-coloured rectangles painted in oils, and was the type of painting exhibited in her first show at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in 1958. Three uneven wide grey lines run horizontally across the middle of the canvas, and appear to have been re-painted several times. They separate two stone-coloured rectangles of loose brush-work; forms which are soft-edged rather than sharply delineated, with slightly rounded corners. The lower rectangle is minimally darker in tone. The painting has no visible pencil lines, and pre-dates by two years those paintings in which a mesh of drawn lines was introduced.





Fig. 62 Agnes Martin's *Innocent Love* (1999) series of paintings at Dia:Beacon. Image: Judy Martin



Fig. 63 Agnes Martin galleries at Dia:Beacon, with *The Spring* (1958) on the facing wall. Image: Judy Martin

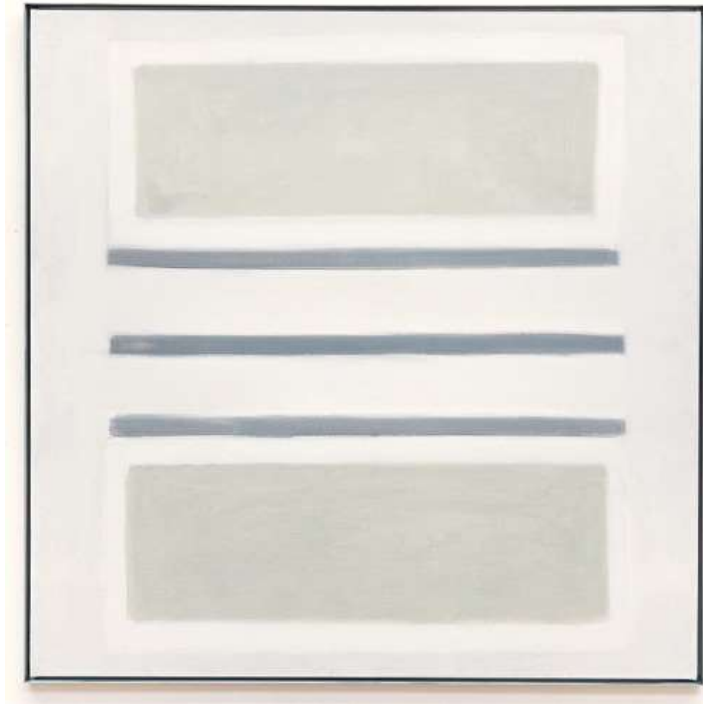


Fig. 64 Agnes Martin, *The Spring* (1958), Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 inches (127 x 127cm). Photograph Dia Art Foundation



Fig. 65 Agnes Martin, *Untitled* (1959), Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches. Image: Judy Martin

In an untitled painting made in 1959 (fig. 65), while Martin was still using oil paint rather than acrylic, the light grey-brown paint has been thinned to make subtly different tones for each rectangular section of a central composition. Some paint was applied sparsely, and there are areas of exposed canvas. My attention was fixed by a crease or ridge across the canvas just below the lower rectangle; an unexpected and surprising intrusion on an otherwise flat surface. Later, in Chapter 8.1, I describe a work by Jane Bustin, where the edge of a painting had this puzzling effect.

At the end of the 1950s, Martin was also experimenting with constructions of found materials, but these are not in the Dia collection. New elements were introduced into paintings after Martin had first tested arrangements of objects in three-dimensional constructions. In the years between 1959 and 1963, she stretched wires across wood supports and incorporated other objects that included nails, boat spikes, bolts and wooden knobs (see *Kali* as an example fig. 53, page 97). In paintings that followed, the round three-dimensional objects were replaced by flat painted circles on canvas, and Dia has an example of this type of painting, *Earth* (1959) (fig. 66).



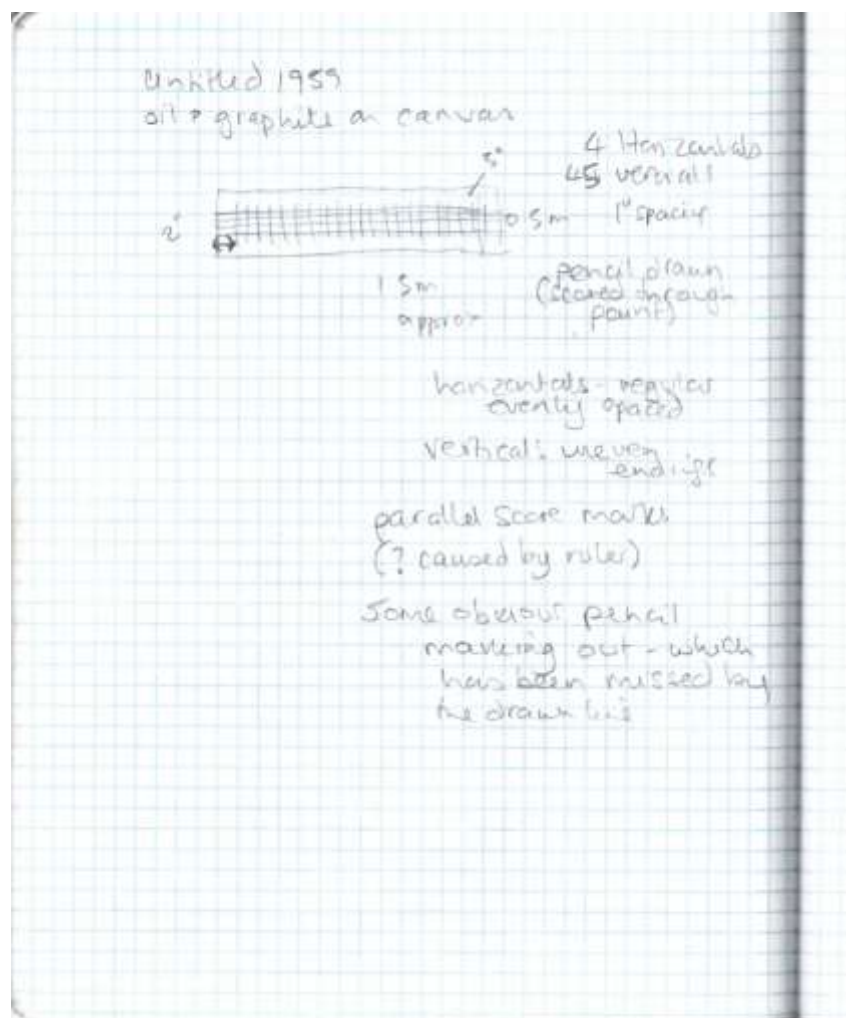
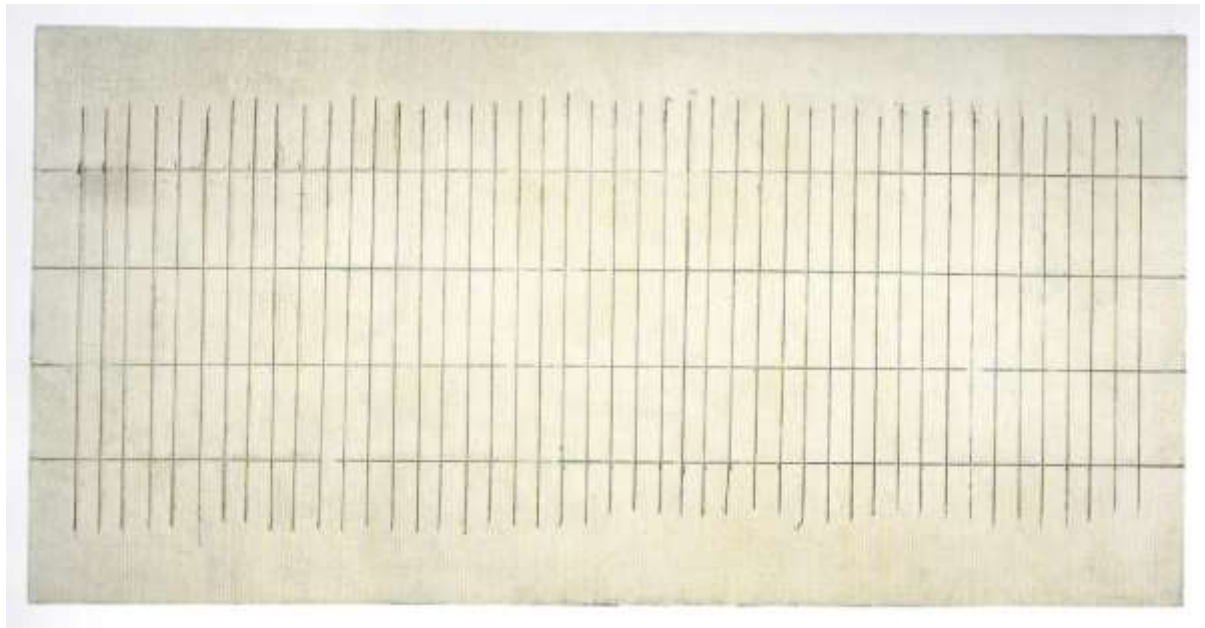
Fig. 66 Agnes Martin, *Earth* (1959) Oil and graphite on canvas, 50 x 50 inches (126 x 126 cm)  
Image: Dia Art Foundation © Agnes Martin/ARS New York

Another painting made in 1959 that I inspected closely (fig. 67) has scored grid lines made with the point of a pencil through the surface of light-coloured oil paint. The untitled painting is far less precise than the later carefully drawn grids of 1960, some of which have dense configurations of delicate lines. Instead, this painting while regularly composed with intervals of around two centimetres, has lines that finish unevenly at the outer margin. The slipperiness of drawing with a pencil into oil paint against the edge of a ruler has caused the lines to slide and finish awkwardly, and there are marks left in the surface of the paint where the edges of a ruler pressed into the surface. Intervals have been measured and marked out around the margins of the central grid, but the drawn lines often miss these marks. Martin's later paintings display a reduction in such 'inconsistencies', while retaining the grid format and systematic measured application of lines. In fig. 68, I show how this painting was recorded in my notes at Dia.

Facing page:

Fig. 67 Agnes Martin, *Untitled* (1959), Oil on canvas, 24½ x 48 inches, Image: Dia Art Foundation

Fig. 68 My handwritten notes to record Martin's untitled 1959 painting at Dia, May 2013



Another advantage of seeing Martin's artwork at Dia is its proximity to the work of a number of other artists from the 1960s, enabling me to compare their methods. I contrasted Agnes Martin's methods of composition and those of Imi Knoebel. Both artists have a practical, craft-like aptitude for making and materials. My key observation was that both artists configured their pre-determined elements in multiple permutations, but did this differently. Martin worked within a grid format, but arranged lines or marks in a new way for each painting. Knoebel reconfigures the same group of structures, collectively titled *Room 19* (1968), into different positions according to the architecture in which each exhibition is situated.

At Dia, Knoebel's installation of plinths and wood frames, which merges the fields of painting, sculpture and architecture, was in a compressed arrangement during my visit (fig. 69). However, these structures are installed quite differently on other occasions, and in other galleries. An example is shown in fig. 70, at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, in February 2015. A quote by the artist in a Wolfsburg press release stated: 'When I'm doing an exhibition, I simply try to create a new painting with the paintings I've just made or put together'. Although Knoebel was speaking about paintings, he has also used this method in *Raum 19* (Internet: Contemporary Art Daily).



Fig. 69 Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 (Room 19)* (1968) 77 structures of wood and Masonite, shown in a compressed arrangement, with some wood frames and flat panels against the wall and other sculptural elements grouped together. Image: Dia Art Foundation



Fig. 70 A different arrangement of *Raum 19* at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, in February 2015. Image: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

### Notes from my practice

Martin and Knoebel used a method of reconfiguring a group of elements to produce an ongoing series of new compositions. In my practice, this was investigated in two separate ways. The first was a re-enactment of Martin's method, with many individual and separate arrangements of line and mark on paper and book covers (see fig.57, page 104). The lines and marks mirrored those I had observed in Martin's paintings. A second method was informed by my observation of Knoebel's *Raum 19*. Also, following a geometric format, I cut-up small sections from a large grid comprising different types of paper and tape. In the resultant smaller works, pieces were interchanged to make different arrangements.

I produced a series of artworks (an example is shown in figs 71 and 72) by folding, wrapping and positioning pieces of paper and card within individual works and across a number of other works made simultaneously. By joining the pieces in layers, I ensured that all the works had actual depth and were two-sided. My decision to create physical depth was in order to consider how paintings might be more three-dimensional. Small pieces of paper and card were fixed with masking tape. Some sections were glued together, but later pulled apart and re-positioned.

Patches of glue soaked through the paper, and this mirrored my experience of Martin's paintings when her paint flowed over pencil-drawn limits. I allowed torn edges of paper to protrude from some of my small constructions to emphasise lack of containment. I also left the



glue stains and torn edges of tape to display the making process.

Important as a process of re-enactment and to my way of working was that left-over remnants, however small, were retained. These were later used to begin further works. This generative method of using remnants was not described verbally by Martin or Knoebel, but it remains visible in their practice and has become an important method in my practice.

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Figs 71 and 72, Two views of a single work, *Untitled* 2013, paper and card, 10.5 x 14cm. Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps



### The Agnes Martin galleries at Dia:Beacon

At Dia, natural light comes in through windows slanted high up at ceiling level and falls evenly on the paintings. Martin's large paintings with light-coloured surfaces, collectively titled the *Innocent Love* series (acrylic and graphite on linen, 1999), are grouped in a separate gallery away from her early paintings. Light reflecting onto these painted surfaces makes them appear radiant. My impression was of a sense of 'lightness in weight' and that they appeared to 'float' away from the wall. A glowing effect, with light reflecting out into the area around the pale acrylic surfaces, led me to note my experience of viewing the paintings as 'purity, lightness, spaciousness'.

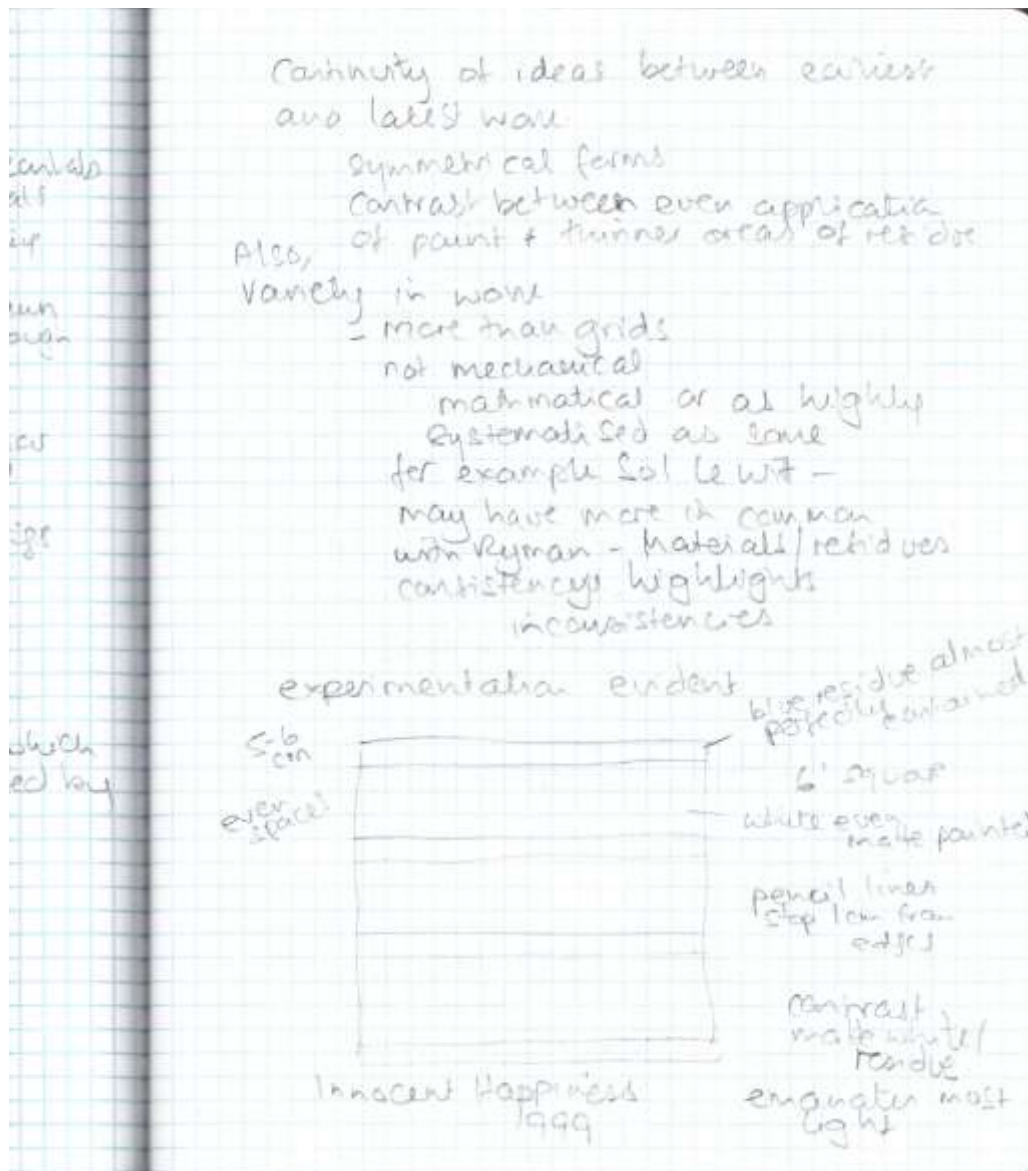
I observed how Martin created subtle perceptual effects which are dependent on natural light. Her knowledge of painting would have included an awareness that a coating of white gesso primer beneath thin diluted paint increases reflectivity of light back through the coloured washes. The square format of these five-foot paintings seems very confining, but this is alleviated by the effects of light spilling out beyond the metal frames, especially from the top edge, into the space of the viewer. When similar paintings were exhibited under spotlights at Tate in 2015, I did not experience these effects. I became increasingly aware of how Martin's paintings depend on natural light when I visited the Harwood Museum in Taos, in May 2016 (see page 96).

The particular choice of eight paintings at Dia from an ongoing series of work, and their curation as a group, gave an impression of surfaces

unified by composition and colour. Martin's ruled graphite lines do not extend to the outer limits of the paintings, stopping just short of the canvas-edge, and are lightly drawn. Where they are intended to delimit areas of thin paint, this containment is not exact, so that areas of paint spill over the lines. I noticed that the paint was so thin in some areas as to be only a slightest trace of pigment on the surface, and that the washy fluidity of the paint caused inconsistencies of transparency and opacity (see fig. 73, handwritten notation of my observations).

I moved constantly around the paintings, shifting from one side to another, and from close up to further back across the gallery. I had noticed in my preliminary research (see Appendix A, page 267) that both Martin's paintings and those of Callum Innes seem to encourage the viewer to move between viewing positions. Other gallery visitors can be seen to do this. The positioning of the spectator merited further consideration when I thought about how a viewer might encounter my artworks. This was enacted differently when I invited people to hold my work. The viewer can examine the work by lifting flaps, separating some layers, and turning the work over to look at both sides. One response specifically confirmed the success of this re-enactment (see Chapter 11.1, page 208). At a presentation of my work, a researcher, when holding an artwork at different angles, described this to be like his experience of moving around when he looked at Martin's paintings at the Tate exhibition.

Facing page: fig 73 Handwritten notation of my observations at Dia in May 2013, showing a diagram of a painting in the *Innocent Love* series (1999)



## 6.2 Tate Modern, London

I had privileged access to view the Tate exhibition in June 2015 while artworks were still being installed, and my reaction was firstly surprise at seeing works that I had not seen before. I saw the constructions, which were assembled from found materials during the late 1950s at Martin's Coenties Slip studio in New York. This selection of Martin's artwork enabled me to examine how she made the transition from constructions to drawn lines and marks. One of Martin's small paintings with rows of nails piercing the surface, *Little Sister* (1962) (fig.1), was not hung in the exhibition, but I saw it while other work was being installed. Lena Fritsch, a curator involved in the research, explained that these grid works have become fragile, with the nails loosening. I scrutinised this painting while it was laid flat on a plinth. The canvas was slightly uneven where pressure was applied to each drawn line, so that viewed from the side it has shallow concertina-like depressions. Another example of this type of work, also with canvas stretched over a twelve-inch square of wood, was included in the retrospective.

*The Laws* (1958) is a long narrow section of painted wood, where the upper half contains fifty boat spikes evenly positioned in a grid format. After having first made such constructions in 1958 (see Chapter 3), Martin began to eliminate wood and other found objects in order to refine a language of drawn lines and marks. From 1963 she continued to investigate subtle changes of colour and composition, producing delicate paintings. There was a hiatus in her painting career after she left New York in 1967, and she did not paint again until 1973 (see Chapter 2.3). There is a change in her paintings after that time, so that later paintings have pale washy bands of colour or geometric forms.

Alongside the constructions from the late 1950s was a game called *The Wave* (1963), which is a small box with a clear lid (fig. 74). Inside the shallow frame, tiny beads can potentially move over an incised grid in the wood base if the game is hand-held. Martin made four other versions of this sculpture. In the exhibition, *The Wave* was placed on a plinth so that the spectator could look in through the blue-tinted Plexiglass surface, but it was curated so as not to be available to touch or hold.

I am attempting to find how practice can augment the way we might understand artwork, and I have experimented in my practice by using a mode of presentation where the viewer can investigate through a variety of senses in addition to visual experience. When I invite a viewer to handle my artworks, I am endeavouring to find whether practical knowledge can also be obtained and experienced effectively through sound, movement, touch and smell (see Chapter 11). A response from one viewer suggested to me that movement might contribute to the practical understanding of an artwork. At a seminar where practice was discussed, he mentioned that a flap attached on the bottom edge of a book-cover artwork quivered when he held the work (see Chapter 11.1, pages 207-208). We were discussing the fragility of that artwork, and 'quiver' conveyed how the delicate materials were experienced.

In conversation with Richard Tuttle when he made a lecture visit to Chelsea College of Arts, London on 9 December 2014, he recalled that *The Wave* marked the end of Martin's work with constructions. It was made for an exhibition of children's games *Toys by Artists* at the end of 1963 in the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. At that exhibition, curated by Jock Truman, children were invited to the gallery with their parents. Curator Tiffany Bell has described how tilting the game causes the beads to create a sound like sea waves. Her suggestion is that like other artists in the sixties, Martin was playing with ideas of chance (Internet: *Agnes Martin, The Wave 1963*, Guggenheim). This contrasts awkwardly with Martin's own statements about John Cage and the employment of chance (see pages 17-18). I am more interested in how the hand-held game invites an intimate form of engagement, and that the lines scored into the base imitate the grid paintings. This object, when moved as intended by its maker, breaks the boundary from painting into kinetic art, and in that respect is unlike Martin's other work.

This further incursion into three-dimensional form is another example where her work pushes at the limits of painting. In Chapter 10.1, I investigate how Lygia Clark invited active participation with her artworks when she made small hinged sculptures which also occupy a place at the limits of painting. The *Bichos* (1960) are metal geometric planes which were intended for the spectator to hold and manipulate into different

positions. My consideration of that participatory type of engagement had an important impact on my investigation, and was key in deciding how I might present my artworks.



Fig. 74 Agnes Martin, *The Wave* (1963), Plexiglass, wood and beads, 26.7 x 26.7 x 8.9cm, Image: Christie's © Agnes Martin Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

I made a number of visits to the Tate exhibition and attended two related events for academics and other people interested in Agnes Martin. Observations by others pointed to different elements of Martin's practice, which informed the way I appreciated those works. I spoke with Brendan Prendeville, an art historian and theorist, in the galleries after a public event where a conservator, Rachel Barker, gave a presentation. His research has in the past investigated Agnes Martin (*The Meanings of Acts: Agnes Martin and the Making of Americans*, Oxford Art Journal, 2007). We contrasted examples of Martin's work and pointed out particular paintings that seemed unusual, or different from her other works. I identified a painting titled *The Heavenly Race (Running)* (1959). This has rows of curved 'scales' scored through the oil paint along the upper half, giving an impression of depth (fig. 75). The painting reminded me that when I sorted my paper and card constructions, I had decided that some were more embellished and



therefore not like Martin's work. Noticing this curved-ness in Martin's painting caused me to reassess what could be included in the characteristics of her work.

Prendeville was surprised by Martin's later solid geometric forms, pointing out *Untitled #1*, (2003) in the gallery; two pyramid or mountain-like dark forms each topped with yellow points and placed side-by-side within a five-foot square canvas (fig. 76). Two thin horizontal lines suggest a horizon. These paintings could be seen to resemble the New Mexico mountain landscape. My observation is that these later solid geometric forms appear to be a continuation of Martin's early experimentation with such shapes.

Our dialogue highlighted differences between an approach based on art history and theory, and knowledge arising out of art practice. Whereas an art-historian expressed surprise at a detour toward what appeared to be an earlier form, my practical experience includes an understanding that an art-making vocabulary is built up over time. Prior art-making knowledge is not discarded or forgotten in new work. Instead, earlier forms, motifs or themes can be re-presented and incorporated with new types of mark or materials. My reading of Martin's practice is that each development in the time-frame of my study proposed another type of making, but that each new work was a re-presentation of earlier compositions and methods.

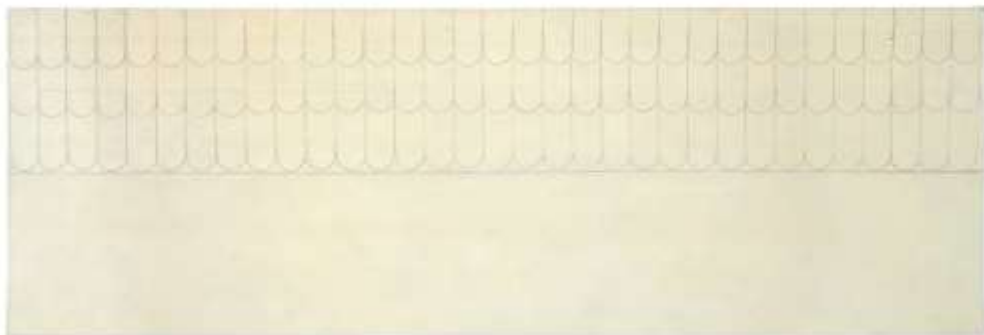


Fig. 75 Agnes Martin, *The Heavenly Race (Running)* 1959 Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 90.2cm  
Photograph: Tate ©2015 Agnes Martin/ Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

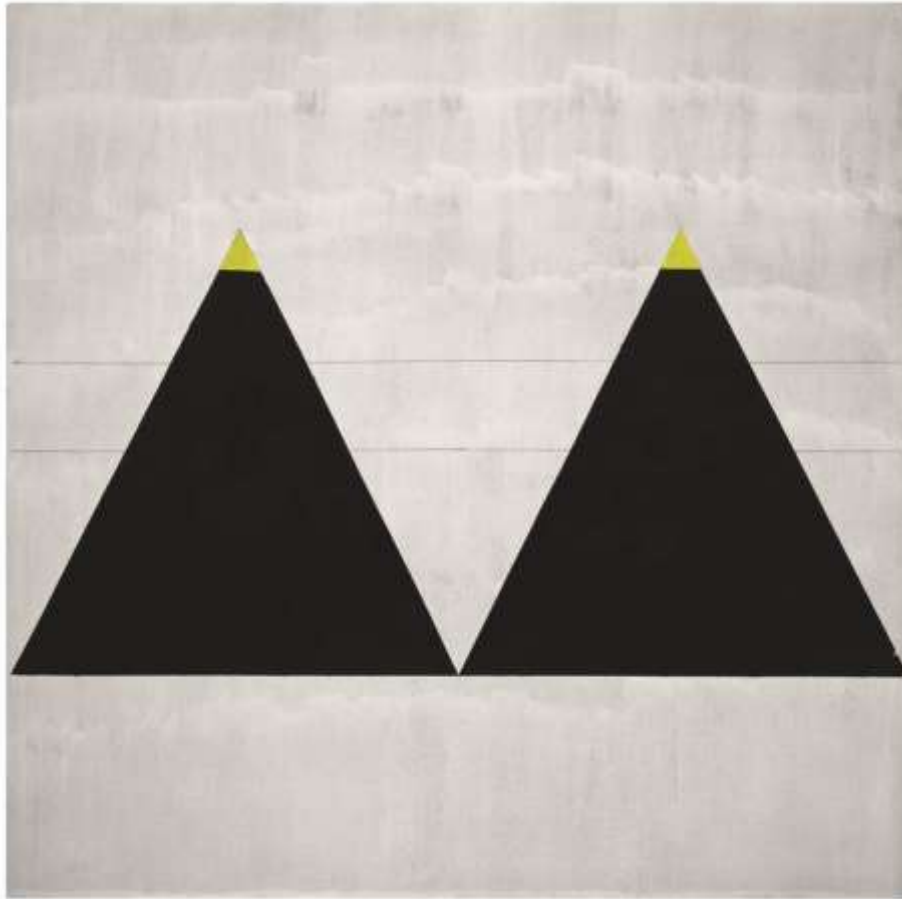


Fig. 76 Agnes Martin, *Untitled I* (2003) Acrylic paint and graphite on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4cm, Photograph: Tate ©2015 Agnes Martin/ Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York

The events that I attended at the time of the *Agnes Martin* exhibition necessarily showed divergent approaches to the study of Martin. Conservator Rachel Barker, in a presentation at Tate on 6 July 2015, titled *Lifting the Fog*, described the cleaning process of *Morning* (1965), a six-foot square canvas which had dirty discolouration of the surface and had been unevenly sprayed with a varnish that was not typical of Martin's other paintings. Her research tended toward a detailed material analysis in order to restore a surface to its earlier condition. She explained that a case needed to be made for a particular artwork before this could be carried out. A technical study of materials allows a conservator to carefully analyse and replicate areas of a painting; and this is another type of re-enactment that aims to copy an original. When I have studied developments in Martin's art-making, I have not made copies, but instead I have made other versions, as I understand them, of her methods and produced new different artworks.

Nancy Princenthal gave a presentation titled *Innocence the Hard Way* at Tate on 15 July 2015 introducing her biography of Agnes Martin, in which she mentioned problems in finding new information on Martin, since there is no organised archive of material. She reported that there was also reluctance on the part of those who knew Martin well to speak about her, which strengthened my resolve to try practice as a method to uncover new knowledge. I have attempted, successfully I believe, to discover whether a practical analysis can be an effective means to contribute to scholarly debate, adding to the voices of others in the field.

When making first-hand observations of an artist's work, and responding through practice, I have aimed to discover how a researcher might gain fresh insights about an earlier artist's decision-making processes (see Chapter 1.2). In Chapter 4.1 I wrote that specialised or detailed practical knowledge could be understood and communicated both through making and in dialogue with other individuals. The presentation of new artworks provides an opportunity for discussion and further testing by others through art-making. By organising workshops, I have intended to bring groups of people together who may be willing to examine, develop and share practical knowledge in the field of contemporary art practice; and to test and develop a practical methodology for myself and others to employ when researching artists.

### Notes from my practice

I observed that Martin employed symmetry and repetition of marks in her paintings. With this in mind, I carefully attached two small printed book pages, one above the other, on a small piece of unmarked lightweight paper, using photo-mounts to affix each corner. The ivory-coloured paper is a drawing paper with a fine weave-like imprint and was intended only as a backing sheet for the thin book pages. The edges of the two printed book pages were closely aligned so that they touched. On them I made repetitive marks with green ink using a dip pen. When I removed the two marked pages I found that green ink had seeped between the pages, creating a very fine broken line across the paper underneath. White backing squares from the photo-mounts remained in each of the four corners.

Selecting this paper with its fine green ink line as the beginning of a new work, I placed it on a larger rectangle of brown parcel paper to give a colour contrast. I added a single row of photo-mounts, with facing paper still attached, just below the bottom edge of the paper. The parcel paper has closely spaced lines running through it, and the paper was carefully torn rather than cut from a larger piece. Each small rectangle of photo-mount facing paper has a single curved edge, which is a tab for easy removal. The paper rectangle divided in this way echoed the symmetry in Martin's compositions, but the decorative bottom edge was unlike Martin. This was after I had added curved pieces of facing paper joined to form a wavy line. This assessment was

revised after I saw Martin's painting *The Heavenly Race (Running)* (1959) (fig. 75, page 130).

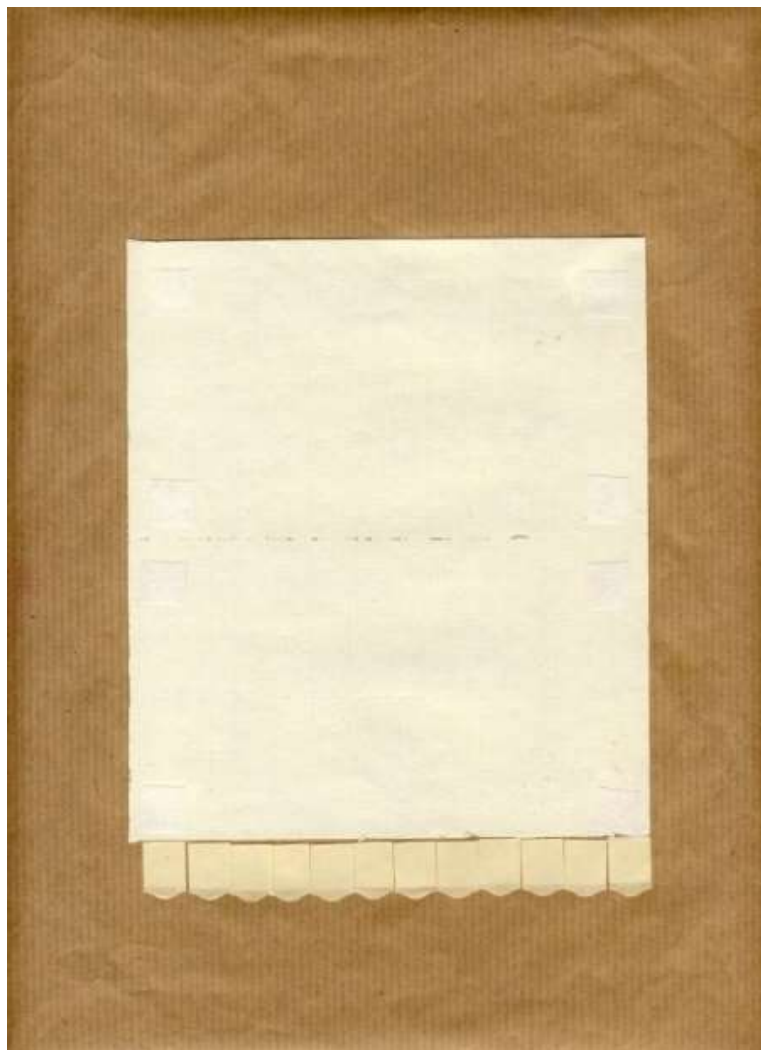
The photo-mount edging along the bottom of the cream paper appeared more decorative than any of Martin's compositions that I had seen up to that point. The found line has a fragile quality, which was emphasised when it was isolated in a new composition. This fine broken line of green ink across the centre of the light-coloured paper replicated the delicate lines in Martin's paintings, which resulted from her method of drawing with a graphite pencil or ink with a hand-held ruler.

This piece was one of a group of works where I began to question the boundaries of the composition. Brown parcel paper acts as a margin around the central composition and gives colour contrast. In a number of subsequent artworks, I continued to place a small composition on top of a larger sheet of paper (fig. 78). This was in response to Martin's use of margins around her early grid compositions. For example, in *The Islands* (1961) (fig. 48, page 85) Martin painted rows of small cream-white dashes within a pencilled grid, but without extending the dashes completely to the edges of the grid. A wide margin borders the grid, with a single thin cream-white painted line around it, sitting within the actual edges of the stretched canvas. I observed that my eye moved both over the grid and out across the wide margins to a point just within the canvas-edge, where tiny dot marks, like dark puncture holes, align the graphite lines.

Following pages:

Fig. 77 *Untitled* (2013) Paper, parcel paper, photomounts and ink, 25 x 31.5cm.  
Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 78 *Untitled* (2013) Paper, parcel paper, tape, 24 x 32cm. Artwork and image  
by Sharon Phelps







My observation of Martin's artworks at Dia and Tate was essential in providing first-hand practical knowledge of her materials and their application; in other words, I could not have practically understood these things by reading about them in books on Martin. I also discovered that a number of visits was necessary, and that during some visits it was helpful to discuss the work on display with others. At Dia, a key observation was the dependency of Martin's light-coloured paintings on natural light, and that these provide certain perceptual effects. They provoke readings of the work akin to the type of emotions she aimed to convey. The way in which I, and other gallery visitors, shifted position suggested to me that I could re-enact that experience by inviting viewers to hold my artworks so that they could inspect them from different angles. As well as being able to see developments in Martin's work at Tate, I also observed apparent deviations from what I had believed to be usual in her practice.

So far in this thesis I have provided a number of examples of how I re-enacted elements that I discerned in Martin's practice, by making new artworks and explaining my methods. In the following chapter, I review some of the key discoveries in my practice; especially in the workshop as a methodology.

## **Chapter 7: Key moments in the development of my practice**

In a catalogue essay for an exhibition of Martin's paintings and drawings at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1977, critic Dore Ashton explained Martin's practical attitude in relation to the artist's interest in Chinese painting:

...she [Martin] has also alluded frequently to the Oriental ways of thinking about painting. And they are effective ways to approach her work of the past decade, for it is very important to understand that what Martin calls 'art work' is a work in the active sense that Chinese painting is a work and not a product. (Hayward Gallery, 1977: 8).

Earlier, in Chapter 6.1, I wrote that I had decided to emphasise signs of making in my work. I did this by using tape to join different sections together and also by not covering areas where glue soaked through the paper. My study of Martin's constructions from the late 1950s and her paintings of the early 1960s has showed her careful exploration of materials, marks, line and interval. In this chapter, I highlight some of my decision-making about marks and materials, and discuss instances where my practice has been informed by some contemporary art. These are recent examples of contemporary practice which have sought to redefine the boundaries of painting, and where paintings have a dialogue with sculpture.

### **1. Selection and sorting materials**

When I sorted materials, I thought about nuances of texture and edge, for example where the flat surface of cardboard is torn to reveal a corrugated layer inside. I also considered discolouration or modulation of tone, particularly when I sorted through old books to find paper that had discoloured with age. Often, when positioning materials I created contrasts of varying degrees of transparency or opacity, and one example of this was when I layered transparent paper over a composition made on a book cover (fig 14, page 39). My choice of lightweight materials, and the method of cutting and folding, enabled small scale works. I aimed for smaller works so that they would be easily

portable, and could be brought with me when practice was discussed with other art researchers and practitioners.

The decision to use old paper was partly based on my observations of specific properties that I had observed in Fieroza Doorsen's drawings at Emma Hill Fine Art, Eagle Gallery, London (20 March – 18 April 2014). Her drawings were pinned to the wall by their corners, and stood out slightly from the wall where the paper had been folded. Ageing had caused the paper to darken, and it had a fragile surface quality that appeared different from new paper.



Fig. 79 Installation view of *Drawing*, 2014 at the Eagle Gallery, London. Fieroza Doorsen's drawings on old paper (outlined in red) in a group exhibition. Photograph: Eagle Gallery, London.

My decision to use such paper was affirmed by seeing images of Tantra artwork (see fig. 13, page 35) which were made on salvaged paper and book covers. Stains, faint writing and ink bleeds appeared to provide a focus for attention, in addition to the painted or drawn image. A transitional moment in my practice occurred after I perceived that this foregrounding of materiality and subtle marks could hold a viewer's attention. After

seeing these works, I also began to work with paper that had discolouration and small areas of handwriting. In my practical experimentation, I became more sensitive to nuances of mark and surface. After drawing many repetitive arrangements of marks on old paper, I can report that I did increasingly seem to enter a tranquil state in which I would say that I experienced heightened awareness. In that state, I was more sensitive to the potential of my art-making materials, but also noticed that small sounds seemed louder, and I felt aware of the slightest air movement on my skin despite being in a still room. I perceived this to be a result of my increased absorption in the act of making, and because this concentration prevented external thoughts. That exclusion of disturbances provided an increase in physical sensations. This calm and focused state produced an intense engagement with my materials, and provided an insight into Martin's concentrated focus when making her paintings. I am not claiming that these states are reproducible on all occasions for all people, but it would seem remiss not to report that I experienced this.

## 2. Testing the limits of painting – objects

When considering how different objects sit on the boundaries of painting or sculpture, I read a statement by Briony Fer in which she described test pieces made by Eva Hesse:

They entangle us in the overlaps between different realms as diverse as the technological and the artisanal, the machine-made and the handmade, the spatial and the temporal, the language of the studio and the language of industry. (*Eva Hesse Studiowork*, 2009:15-16)

Fer co-curated an exhibition of Hesse's experimental pieces, *Eva Hesse Studiowork*, at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (5 August – 25 October 2009) with an essay in the accompanying catalogue. Looking through the materials, test pieces and completed works after Hesse's death, Fer questioned conventional ideas about sculpture. She proposed that Hesse's experimental pieces be re-named as 'studioworks'. That it was seemingly necessary to differently frame the terms that describe Hesse's studio experimentation, reminded me of the constant struggle for language to adequately convey art work. I discuss this further when I describe how I organised workshops to

present my practice (see Chapter 11). In that workshop context, when verbal dialogue is inadequate to consider art practice, an alternative to spoken discussion is available through art-making.

Martin's constructions of the late 1950s and Hesse's studio work are experimental in nature, and can be compared with other recent work that explores the boundaries of painting. Contemporary artist Kate Owens covered hired trestle tables with repetitive chalk drawings in the exhibition *Stopped Clocks in Places of Busyness* at Fold Gallery, London (12 October – 9 November 2013). The works in that group exhibition described the passing of time and the contemplation of a remembered scene or moment. The exhibition statement explained that the works responded to an account by John Lawrence from a narrative in a book that he had read ten years earlier. The remembered scene is recalled in fragments, because 'time not only depletes and erases but also results in a freedom to sidestep, to meander, to completely reinvent', and this implied a contemplative moment, bolstered by Lawrence saying: 'I kept turning it [the remembered scene in the book] over in my head, like an object, in order to better understand it' (Internet, *Stopped Clocks in Places of Busyness*).

The hired trestle tables, being unusual supports on which to make chalk marks, suggested that the work was time-limited, but might be subsequently re-made on another occasion. Owen's chalk marks on a wooden surface were reminiscent of Cy Twombly's calligraphic blackboard paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This example of contemporary practice suggests that the boundary of painting is, in some cases, extended by temporality and installation. I will go on to describe how another contemporary artist, Simon Callery, tests the limits of painting by making structures which protrude into the space of the viewer.

Facing page:

Fig. 80 Kate Owens, *Mean (6ft trestle)* (2011) Hired function table and chalk, dimensions variable, Image: Fold Gallery, London

Fig. 81 Kate Owens, *Mean (½ horseshoe)* (2011) Hired function table and chalk, dimensions variable, Image: Fold Gallery, London



I had privileged access to the Laburnum Street studio of London-based artist Simon Callery in March 2014, just after he had installed artworks in the exhibition *Enantiodrama* (15 March – 10 May 2014) at Fold Gallery, London. His studio floor, and every inch of flat surface, was strewn with various sizes and shapes of wood. This reminded me of the long tables (formerly from a works canteen) in my studio; covered in scraps of paper, often remnants which were retained, or pieces of new work in progress. Because of this similarity in studio method, I could interpret his working procedure as being one where any piece of wood could at some point be required for an artwork. I showed him one of my artworks, where holes were pierced through paper that had been immersed in acrylic paint diluted until watery, then mixed with gesso. Important to further developments in my practice, he described the artwork as being ‘two-sided’. This was influential in thinking about how paintings can be viewed as three-dimensional.

At a later exhibition of Callery’s work, *Simon Callery: Flat Paintings*, 9 October – 14 November 2015, also at the Fold Gallery, a written statement in the gallery information described his inquiry as being ‘to find new things for painting to do’, and that he challenged the notion that paintings are necessarily flat. The gallery’s press release elaborated:

He [Callery] discovers a unique aesthetic and formal language in arranging painting frames and canvas in unusual contexts identifying their sculptural and object related potential[...] it is clear from the punctured surfaces and layered structures of these paintings that the artist is recasting the constituent elements of painting and developing convincing alternatives to established conventions. (Internet: Fold Gallery, London)

The gallery statement also described how the spectator is made aware of the processes of looking at Callery’s artwork because of the direct availability of its ‘inner workings’. Callery has explained that he wants the viewer to move from side to side, because he is interested in how we can understand works physically through the senses. When asked ‘Why do you make physical objects when the whole breadth of the ever-expanding field [painting] is open to you?’, Callery responded by explaining that his concern is to find out what materials can do, and how spectators respond.

I make physical paintings – because I am interested in the viewer as a physical being – a fully sentient, inquisitive, perceptive, decision-making, information-processing, emotional, idiosyncratic thinking being. I want the painting to involve and engage the full attention of that person.

(Simon Callery, *Interview in Abstract Critical* 22/8/12. Questions for Angela de la Cruz and Simon Callery: Enantiodromia Part I. Fold Gallery, London. Internet, <https://abstractcritical.com/article/questions-for-angela-de-la-cruz-and-simon-callery-enantiodromia-i/index.html>).

A viewer can peer between layers of fabric, but I also inspected the roughness of the stitching and loose threads. The colour results from a process of staining with distemper (a water-based paint-mix of whiting, or chalk, and rabbit-skin glue or binder). Callery uses a method of soaking the fabric rather than applying paint to its surface. He has explained that since he does not work with images, qualities like the hardness or softness of the canvas, and elements like holes in the canvas allow the painting to communicate through its physicality. He has made paintings at archaeological sites, so that resulting work has a very direct relationship with the earth and other physical qualities and materials of a landscape. When positioned in the gallery, the paintings project from the wall so that they are object-like. (*Conversations about painting: Simon Callery*, Internet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEeUaaYprxo>).





Fig. 82 Simon Callery, *Wallspine (Leaf)* (2015), Canvas, distemper, thread, aluminium, and steel brackets, 206 x 236 x 84cm. Image: Fold Gallery, London

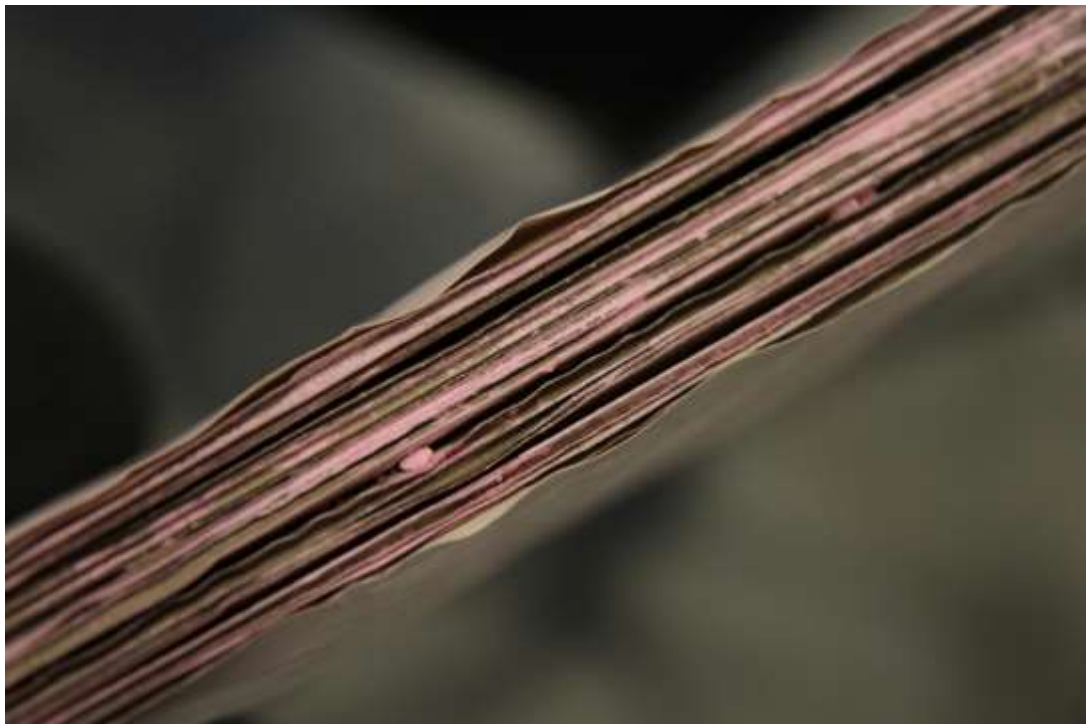
### Notes from my practice

In addition to objects and stretched wire on wood, Martin also scored through paint with a sharp implement (see *Untitled*, 1959) (fig. 67, page 118), and pierced into the surface of wood or canvas (see *The Garden*, 1958 (fig. 21, page 49) and *Little Sister* (fig. 1, page 3). I worked initially with cardboard and packaging materials, after first making a comparison between Martin and Imi Knoebel (see Chapter 6.1). I transcribed marks that I had found in the cardboard; replicating the puncture holes left after the removal of staples by making paired pencil holes or dots. This play between dots and puncture holes was also informed by my observation of dot-like marks along the edges of Martin's painting *The Islands*, 1961 (fig. 48, page 85).

In figures 83 and 84, I show an artwork that I made in 2014, where I have stacked corrugated cardboard and then wrapped it in paper. I rubbed pink chalk pastel over the outer-covering of paper and into the layered edge. Depth is emphasised by small fragments of powdery chalk that are lodged between the layers of cardboard in the side of the artwork. The paper wrapping has been pierced to make pairs of puncture holes. These mirror the holes in the cardboard, where staples had been pulled out. This artwork was constructed from an industrial material, cardboard packaging, but also incorporates purpose-made puncture marks to simulate the functional marks made by staples. Delicate powdery texturing provided by the chalk pastel acted upon the language of industry by means of an artistic intervention.

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Figs. 83 and 84 *Untitled* (2014), Cardboard, paper and chalk pastel, 21.5 x 23 x 2.5cm. (Top and side views) Artwork and photographs by Sharon Phelps



I gave examples in this chapter of how looking at some contemporary art has assisted my practical study of Martin. In Chapter 8, I describe how contemporary artists Jane Bustin and Gabriel de la Mora have experimented with a variety of unusual materials and that, like Martin's constructions of found materials, they also make object-like paintings.

## Chapter 8: Contemporary practice

This chapter examines two contemporary artists; Jane Bustin and Gabriel de la Mora. They have been selected because they both introduced a variety of materials into their paintings, so that those works use the language of painting but also have an object-like quality. In the first part of this chapter I describe two visits in June and July 2014 to an exhibition of Bustin's work, *The Astonishing* (27 June – 11 July 2014) at Austin Forum, Hammersmith, London. During my first visit, a sound piece was performed in the gallery by Lina Lapelyte, titled *Where are you?* I next visited the exhibition while Bustin was in the gallery, and spoke with her about her paintings, and about her recent experimentation with ceramics. My notes from those visits can be found in **Appendix C**.

Following those visits, I describe how in December 2015 I saw some examples of Bustin's ceramic pieces at the Ingleby Gallery, in Edinburgh. I contrasted Bustin's work with Martin in order to consider tactility, and to compare the different types of irregularity in their surfaces. Martin produced imperfection by subtle differences of mark, surface or texture. Bustin juxtaposes various materials, so that the eye shifts between different textures. When I spoke with Bustin on 9 July 2014 about her ceramic pieces, we discussed Japanese tea bowls, in which imperfections caused by hand-making are highly regarded by practitioners of the tea ceremony.

The second part of this chapter presents an account of my visit in May 2016 to an exhibition of Gabriel de la Mora's work, *Gabriel de la Mora: Series* (18 March – 17 May 2016) at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London. On that visit I was accompanied by curator, Kat Saperia. She explained that De la Mora's works in the exhibition comprised aluminium plates and rubber mats that had been discarded after printing on an offset printing press. I subsequently organised a workshop in the gallery on 5 May 2016, within the exhibition, at which the curator gave a talk about De la Mora. The workshop was the last of three that I organised, and was the only occasion where I made a particular selection of individual participants, to enable more focused discussion and art-making around art practice. The workshop is described in detail in Chapter 11.

## 8.1 Jane Bustin

### Visit 1 – Exhibition with sound performance

This thesis has so far focused on a viewer's engagement with the nuances of mark and materiality of Martin's artworks, occurring as a result of drawing close to their surfaces. Jane Bustin juxtaposes a variety of un-like materials, thereby drawing attention to their differences, which may nevertheless be quite subtle. Sixteen small works were displayed at Bustin's exhibition, *The Astonishing*, in London in 2014. The setting for the exhibition was a creative space set up by the Order of St Augustine, at Austin Forum, Hammersmith, to explore spirituality and social justice. At the opening, I experienced the paintings together with a sound performance by Lina Lapelyte. The repeated lines of song *Where are you?* by Lapelyte and one other singer, echoed back and forth across the gallery between the paintings. Bustin explained that she wanted the spectator to engage with her paintings in an active way, perhaps through the inclusion of sound or movement in the exhibition experience.

In the small works, I noticed that contrasts were set up between paired works or within individual panels of single works. This has the effect of emphasising surface qualities and edges. Since there are almost no incidents in the surfaces, the spectator is directed to slight variations of line and tone, and between the materials, which include pairings of wood and latex, copper and weave. In addition to painted areas, colours are that of raw materials, such as wood or discoloured paper. When contrasting materials are paired in this way, it further highlights their texture. The eye moves over surfaces such as smooth and shiny copper, textile-weave, folds of latex and pale smooth wood. While the viewer is engaged by the surfaces of these materials and their qualities, Bustin also emphasises some edges with areas of colour or by changing the depth of adjacent panels.

While scanning the panels and surfaces in the exhibition, I was puzzled by the edge of one painting, *Tablet II* (2014) (fig. 85). A smooth veil-like covering of paint over one half of the painting left an edge exposed, but did not reveal the wood support like the other uncovered part of the painting. I returned to look at the edge a number of times, disturbed by my inability to identify the material. When I looked at that painting, my eye was fixed by the edge and bottom corner. The experience was like seeing the crease

or ridge running across the canvas in Martin's painting *Untitled* (1959) (fig. 65, page 115). Although I inspected all Jane Bustin's surfaces intently, this particular corner and edge caused me to look even more closely. Bustin later told me that she had used a page from an old hymn book, and that this paper had deteriorated over time, producing brown discoloured edges. This unforced irregularity contributed to my later decision to make artworks on old book covers; re-enacting Bustin's strategy to draw attention to the materials but also reveal something of the history of the materials used

When noticing and examining a particular irregularity in Bustin's or Martin's work, I was, of course, not able to explore further through touch, but only to look, as closely as possible. In my workshop methodology, I invite people to handle my artworks. The works can be turned over, to be viewed from different angles. The density and weight can be experienced, and some layers can be lifted or separated to look inside. This method of offering artworks to be picked up and examined is intended to provide a more direct physical encounter, and to invite a close form of scrutiny in order to share practical knowledge.

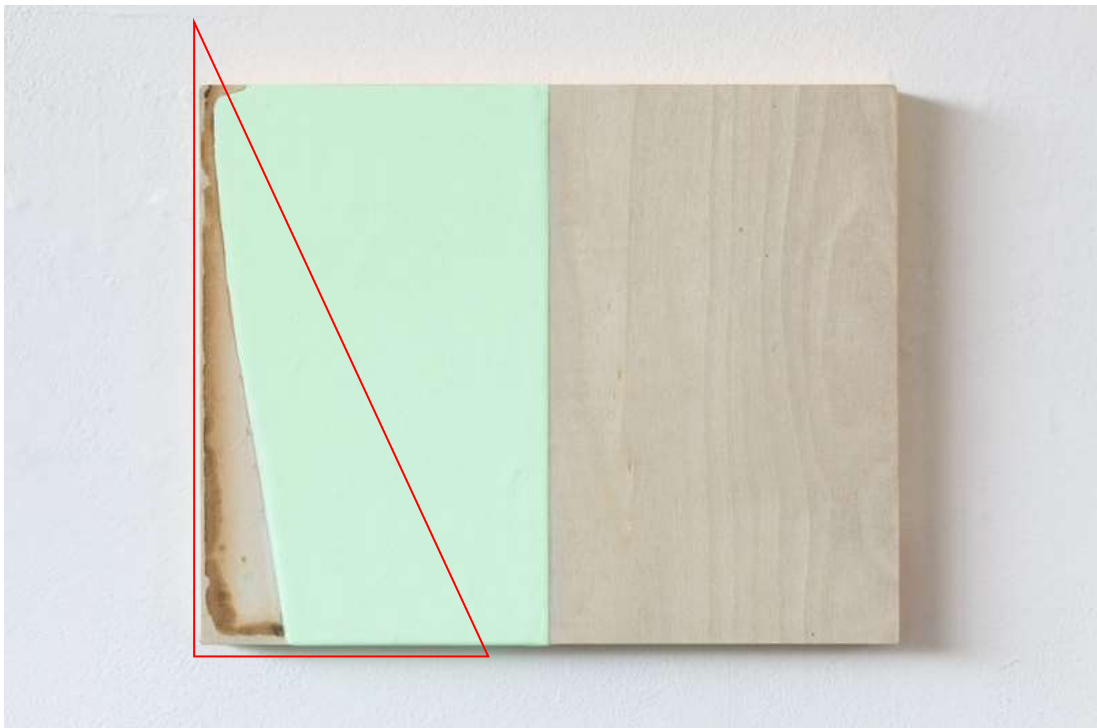


Fig. 85 Jane Bustin, *Tablet II* (2014) acrylic, gesso, paper, wood, 20 x 25cm. Photograph: courtesy of Jane Bustin. The irregular corner and edge is outlined in red.



### Visit 2 – In conversation with Jane Bustin

In a conversation with Jane Bustin on 9 July 2014 at the exhibition, she described her recent experimentation with ceramic techniques. At that point, Bustin was testing the placement of ceramic bowls in relation to her paintings. I had recently read *The Unknown Craftsman, A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, written by Soetsu Yanagi, (commentary by Bernard Leach, 1972, revised edition 1989). The author described the Japanese tea ceremony and the ceramic vessels used in that ritual. I had been thinking about the qualities of the simple tea bowls, and their relation to hand-making. When Yanagi wrote of the Tea masters of Japan three or four centuries ago, he explained that irregularity was accepted as a sign of the human process of making:

The shapes are irregular, the surfaces dry or sandy, the glazes of uneven thickness; the pieces piled in the kiln remain unglazed where the pots rest upon one another; fire cracks are accepted. All these characteristics are not merely put up with, but are taken as an integral part of pot making and are therefore of potential beauty. The Tea masters found depth in this naturalness.

(Soetsu Yanagi, 1972, revised edition 1989:120)

My perception is that Martin and Bustin intend to reward the close attention given to their paintings, and that both artists play with subtle contrasts and irregularity of surface. Martin appears to do this by accepting slightly uneven marks and bleeds of ink or paint, and then offering these ‘imperfections’ to the viewer. Bustin displays contrast by placing different types of surface next to each other. I have observed that in Martin’s paintings, instances of slight irregularity and unevenness in her hand-made surfaces do not disrupt regular patterns over the entire composition, so that my eye travels unhindered across the hand-drawn marks. Only close looking reveals the changing densities of paint and uneven pressure in her drawn lines. Bustin’s juxtaposition of materials prompted me to scrutinise the surfaces and differing textures, and I peered inside or around edges, discovering small bright areas of colour. However, unexpected instances in the work of both Martin and Bustin produced a different type of perception. The crease in Martin’s painting *Untitled* (1959) and the discoloured and deteriorated edge in Bustin’s work *Tablet II* (2014) created moments of *surprising* irregularity, and caused a more intense and focused contemplation of the materiality of those paintings.

**Visit 3 – Ceramic pieces at the Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh**

I saw Jane Bustin's ceramic artworks in December 2015, at the Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh (*Resistance and Persistence*, 28 November 2015 – 30 January 2016). The exhibition also displayed work by other artists, with a collection of Martin's prints on one wall. There was a shelf supporting Bustin's dark irregularly shaped ceramic bowls. On a separate wall, there was an arrangement of Bustin's stretched porcelain slabs (fig. 86). These were coloured with streaks of mottled light blue pigment. An investigation of ceramic techniques and porcelain as one type of material had been combined with a painterly engagement in the process of making. Bustin had used craft skills in conjunction with her experience of painting and a knowledge of composition and colour. I perceived the stretched slabs of porcelain to have a relation to other forms used by Bustin; book pages, wood or copper panels, sections of fabric or latex, and to be object-like paintings.



Fig. 86 Jane Bustin, *Blue Notes* (2015) Porcelain, terra sigillata oxides, glaze, 41 x 30cm overall, Image: courtesy of the artist and the Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh

## 8.2 Gabriel de la Mora

Contemporary artist Gabriel de la Mora composes grid paintings using the residual materials of printing, such as cut pieces of metal plate and blankets from presses. Like Martin's constructions and first small grid paintings with nails, his works comprise not only the traditional materials of painting but also found elements, which are attached to wood panels, sometimes with tiny screws or nails visibly penetrating into the surface of the painting. To investigate his paintings and methods in greater detail and to invite responses to my practice I organised a workshop for artist-researchers around an exhibition of his work, *Gabriel de la Mora: Series* at Timothy Taylor gallery, London, in May 2016 (see Chapter 11).



Fig. 87 Gabriel de la Mora, *PAI/21-Ife* (2015), discarded aluminium plate from offset printing press mounted on wood 180x120x6cm, Image: Gabriel de la Mora courtesy of Timothy Taylor London

In my notes from a first visit to the exhibition I recorded from personal observation that he selects fragments containing stains, lettering and discolouration, so that found marks are already present on the materials. Fragments are then ordered into a grid scheme by muted colour and reflective quality (shiny or dull). Considered placement of individual pieces is situated within the framework of a cohesive and unified whole. My perception of these paintings is that he capitalises on found marks, which include dotted lines, lettering, numbers, tape residues and streaks of coloured ink. These small details held my attention, but did not detract from my sense that the paintings are calm surfaces. By carefully looking, I could follow his method of making to ascertain that he had made an initial selection of fragments and then engaged in careful ordering. However, there are other aspects of his methods that remained hidden until further information was provided by the curator.

In the artwork *PAI/3072-If*(2015) (fig. 88), small cut fragments from an archive of metal printing plates have been positioned into a grid. The tiny pieces require the viewer to position themselves in close proximity to the work in order to see individual marks and stains on each fragment. Further away, the surface coalesces, like Martin's grid paintings, displaying inflections of tone and contrasts of light reflectivity from separate pieces of shiny or dull metal.



Fig. 88 Gabriel de la Mora, *PAI/3072-If*(2015), discarded aluminium plate from offset printing press mounted on wood, 180 x 120 x 6cm, Image: copyright Gabriel de la Mora courtesy of Timothy Taylor, London

De la Mora makes something new from discarded materials, and also uses remnants from the making process to begin new works. A work made with rubber blankets, *MCI/9-IV e* (2015) (fig. 89) held my interest when I was unable to determine what the materials were, so that I was drawn to look more closely. The composition comprises large sections, where the surface is interrupted by crumpled tape and coloured stains. The depth of the panel causes the painting to protrude object-like from the wall. Tactility is enhanced by crinkles in the tape and other inconsistencies that render the surface slightly uneven. The gallery environment prevents exploring by touching in this work, but texture of surface and thinking about touch could be explored through the examples in my practice and in further art-making when I brought a range of materials to the gallery for the workshop.



Fig. 89 Gabriel de la Mora, *MCI / 9-IV e* (2015) Discarded rubber blanket from offset printing press mounted on wood, 60x45x4cm. Image: Gabriel de la Mora courtesy of Timothy Taylor London

### Notes from my practice

In my experimentation with materials and surfaces, I made a number of line drawings on different papers, using either ball-point pen or graphite pencil. The lines look like calligraphy, with a continuous loop that resembles a joined-up letter 'e'. A collage drawing (fig. 90) developed out of this experimentation, with rows of looped lines drawn firmly into sheets of copper leaf, which have a backing paper like tracing paper.

I layered the copper leaf drawings onto wood panel using a clear acrylic medium, a process which led to some of the copper leaf peeling away. Residues of copper are fixed between the lines, with tiny pieces enclosed in the oval of the loops. While Martin's painted surfaces are not fragmented, the dilute paint can be so thinly applied that the particles of pigment settle on the surface like small fragments (see Chapter 6.1, page 125).

In my artwork, there are nuances of tone in the fragile surface caused by a reaction between the bright shiny copper leaf and the acrylic medium, with some darkening or dulling, so that only a few tiny areas are close to the original shiny colour. There are divisions at the edges of sections which are not completely regular due to the uneven separation of the copper leaf from its backing sheet. The layered sheets are unified in a regular arrangement, so that the eye notices only small incidents without being distracted from an overall sense of a calm surface.

It is problematic to accurately reproduce such slight changes of colour, tone and surface in an image. This emphasises the necessity to look at nuanced artwork first-hand, but I have included images to document the artwork here (figs. 90 and 91). The images do not clearly pick out the looped lines, which are visible in the white areas when the work is encountered first-hand, but I have aimed to reproduce the colour as faithfully as I can so that they can be close to the colour of the original.

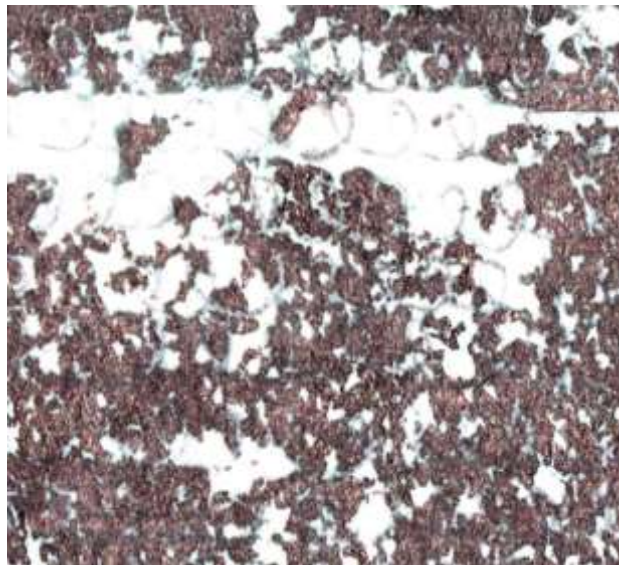
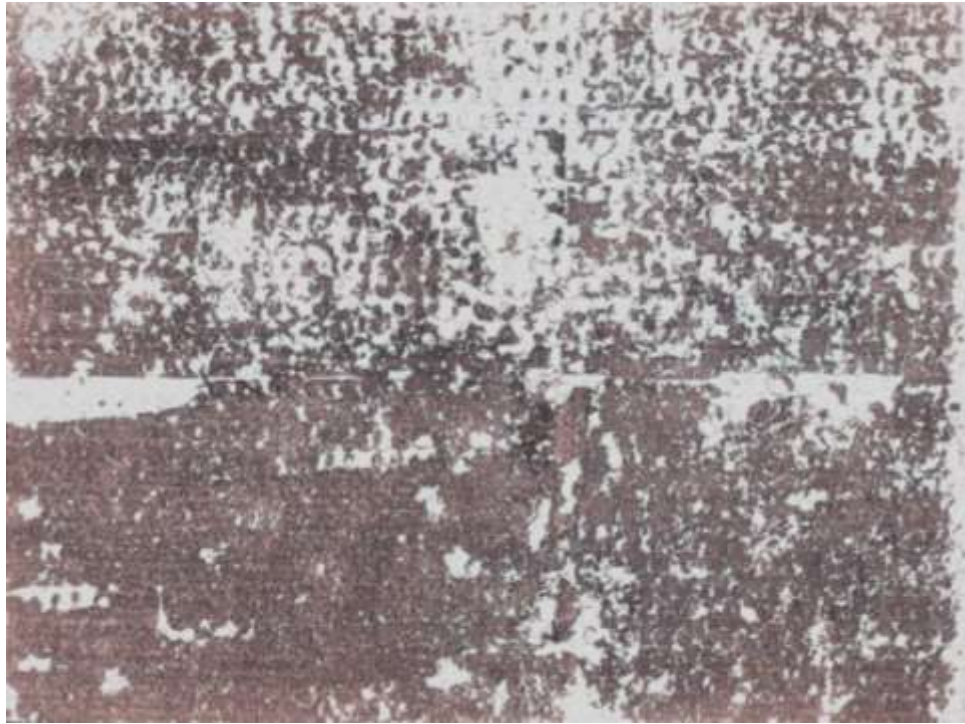
The shiny quality of the copper is lost. Individual sections are visible, showing their placement. The looping line is more easily visible in the white area where some of the copper leaf has peeled away. Copper has remained attached in places to the line, and the whole surface has a mottled effect where the leaf has fragmented in the process of impressing a line into the surface, and has peeled away from the backing paper.

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Fig. 90 *Untitled* (2013) Copper leaf drawing mounted on wood panel, 18 x 24cm, Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 91 A detail of the surface





This work had previously been shown in a group exhibition of practice-led research at Chelsea College of Arts, London in 2012 before being exhibited at a Visual Symposium at Beaconsfield, London, in April 2013 (Chapter 1.2). On both occasions when it was shown, I observed that viewers positioned themselves close to the surface, and looked carefully in order to discover how it had been made. They described to me that they were unable to fully determine how it was made, except to see areas of drawn looping line. They could only understand how the surface had been fabricated when I explained my method.

I have noticed that the layered surface resembles *pentimenti*, where an artist has erased or revised areas of a painting - or a *palimpsest*, where a pre-existing marked surface has been re-inscribed. Although this response was not confirmed by others when viewing the copper leaf drawing, the notion of a *palimpsest* was remarked upon when I brought a selection of book cover works to a supervision meeting. It was referred to again by a practice-led photography researcher at the Royal Holloway University, London, in November 2015 when looking at my book cover works where drawn marks are overlaid on an earlier surface (see Chapter 11).

In this chapter I explained that when I visited Jane Bustin's exhibition *The Astonishing*, the materials and construction of the works enticed me to examine them close up, to peer inside and around edges. In Gabriel de la Mora's work, I scrutinised small areas of print or crumpled tape, and looked carefully at the surface of one particular work *MCI/9-IVe* (2015) (fig. 89), because I could not determine what material he had used. This was when I was told by the curator that he had used rubber blankets. In my copper leaf work, I described how viewers positioned themselves close to the surface in order to discover how it was made. The following chapter extends the discussion of close viewing between the spectator and artwork, to give examples of how writers have described Martin's paintings, and how her surfaces invite close engagement.

## Chapter 9: Closeness between the artwork and spectator

Some existing writing on Martin has described how her paintings, through her use of extremely subtle marks and tonal gradations, encourage spectators to look closely. In an essay titled *The Cause of the Response*, Anne Wagner puts this to the test, by positioning herself close to the paintings and moving around at different distances. Wagner identified ‘the particularity, the individuality’ of each grid, arguing that information is offered ‘provisionally, elusively’ and that a viewer experiences the ‘hand’s action’ (Wagner, in Cooke, 2011: 236). At the beginning of this thesis, I asked whether nuances of mark, surface and tone, by drawing the viewer close, could offer contemplative experience, and enable art-making methods to be understood by the spectator. I further wrote that Martin’s methods reveal themselves to those looking carefully at her paintings. In this chapter, I describe how closeness is enacted between Martin’s artwork and the spectator, and how some readings have speculated on connections and even drawn lines of causality between the intimacy or closeness invited by her paintings, and aspects of her personal life. This is even including her involvement with a circle of artists in same-sex relationships.

Martin’s paintings reveal the mindful and close attention invested in them, and therefore persuade the viewer to attend similarly closely. I also offer an example of a contemporary artist, Anna-Bella Papp, whose intimate and solitary working method lends itself to a comparison with Martin. By making that comparison, I aim to show how mindful attention given to making artworks can reciprocally motivate a viewer to attend closely.

### Intimacy

Martin showed her paintings at Betty Parsons Gallery from 1958 until the end of 1962. Parsons represented many Abstract Expressionist artists, predominantly masculine and patriarchal, and also many of Martin’s peer group, which included artists who happened to be gay, lesbian or bi-sexual. Like Martin, a number of other artists within the

community at Coenties Slip, New York, were in same-sex relationships. Some of the queer artists in her neighbourhood, including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, were not part of her immediate circle. However, Ellsworth Kelly, Roberta Indiana, Lenore Tawney and Ann Wilson all participated in daily life in her studio building (see Chapter 3). In an essay titled *Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction*, Jonathan Katz described this group as a 'quasi family of (mostly) other queer artists' (in Cooke ed. 2011: 176). Tawney not only provided Martin with financial assistance and collected Martin's artwork, but I earlier described how Tawney also provided intimacy within a romantic relationship (see Chapter 2.2). She offered personal support and companionship, and helped Martin during episodes of mental distress. When Martin left New York in 1967, Tawney accompanied her for two weeks on a journey through the western states of North America (Princenthal, 2015). The two remained in contact after Martin left Coenties Slip and returned to Taos, New Mexico. Later, Martin not only ended their friendship, but also denied any possible influence that Tawney could have had on her work. It was not unusual for Martin to edit accounts of her life and her own earlier statements (Hudson, 2016:68-70).

Brendan Prendeville has argued that Martin's shared sense of community with fellow artists at Coenties Slip was through tacit support; an awareness of shared purpose rather than a declared affiliation. He proposed that an 'intimate and confiding sense of community [...] finds its way into Martin's paintings, both through her acts in making them and ours in seeing them' (*The Meanings of Acts: Agnes Martin and the Making of Americans*, 2007: 70). Prendeville pointed out that each of Martin's artworks engages our close attention, and that 'drawing close' is a characteristic of her work in which the engagement of our attention is tied to the 'ethos of friendship' (2007: 71). He explained: 'To be drawn close [...] is to apprehend her care in making the painting, and to assume the posture of care and affectionate concern oneself. It is akin to a posture of close and confiding interlocution' (2007: 70). The viewer draws in to notice changes in the nuanced surfaces and, in doing so, the careful act of making is shared.

Artist Roger Cook recalled his first experience of seeing one of Martin's paintings at Lawrence Alloway's exhibition *Systemic Painting* at the Guggenheim, New York in

1966, at a time when he was struggling with his own homosexuality. He described Martin's painting *The City* made that year as 'a six-foot square canvas with a delicate grid of blue lines on a slightly modulated white gesso ground'. He remembers being drawn in by 'the containing quietude of this painting' (2016:22). Cook proposed that Martin's grids provided her with a calm 'holding environment', and perhaps also a substitute for the lack of motherly love that she experienced in childhood. He also infers that the grid paintings were possibly a steadying backdrop against the 'turmoil' of her mental state and undeclared lesbianism (2016:22). Cook declares the transformative potential of an encounter with one of Martin's paintings; that they seem to provide an environment that offers care (2016:22). (See **Appendix D** – A text on 'Closeness' submitted for publication in December 2016).

#### **Closeness: Anna-Bella Papp**

At first sight there may seem to be only superficial resemblances between the artworks of Agnes Martin and the small unfired clay tablets made by contemporary artist Anna-Bella Papp (Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, 27 March - 18 April 2015). Both artists prefer uniformity of size, have a predilection for neutral colours, and allude to classical art. Perhaps more significantly, they share an attitude to making that suggests mindful attention to that which is subtle and ephemeral in their everyday life, lending the artworks of both artists a sense of intimacy and fragility. Papp's clay tablets arise from careful observation of her surroundings in Rome, where she now lives, and therefore act as a form of recording. These are compared with cuneiform clay tablets; whose purpose was also to record. Listening to the artist describing her working processes, it is apparent that making art is part of her everyday life. The soft clay slabs are shaped and scored on a table at home rather than in a studio (Internet: 360 Speaker Series at The Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas).



Fig. 92 Anna-Bella Papp, *Untitled*, 2014, Clay, 30.8 x 28 x 3 cm. Image: Stuart Shave Modern Art

Papp's tablet-like forms are hand-sculpted from unfired clay. They are exhibited flat on a table-like surface, with no specific orientation for viewing. Art writer Gilda Williams, reviewing Papp's 2015 exhibition at Stuart Shave Modern Art, London, wrote that although Papp's sculptures may remind one of Ben Nicholson or Carl Andre, she 'owes less to modern art than to ancient floor patterns, or the fossilized remains of leaves petrified in stone' (Artforum, Summer 2015: 365). On viewing Papp's clay sculptures, which she compares to open books, Williams is drawn to the tactile nature of the unglazed clay pieces.

Their tabletop size and low-tech manufacture suggest a domestic art, a slow and studious making that requires only a clean, dry place for a sole worker: the artist. The impression is that each must have been completed in one sitting - like reading a short story, rather than a drawn-out novel. (Artforum, Summer 2015: 365).

Williams feels an urge 'to pick one up, in order to feel its bony texture and examine the hidden verso' (Artforum, Summer 2015: 365). Her desire for this kind of intimate engagement with the artist's clay sculptures is reminiscent of the experience of viewing Martin's paintings like *The Tree* (1964) (fig. 56, page 101) and *Leaf* (1965) (fig. 55, page 99), which may suggest the potential tactility of the surface, and recall similar sensual engagement from our experiences of the natural world.

When I looked at examples of Papp's carved slabs I was reminded of ancient tablets that have carefully incised marks. The image below (fig. 93) shows an inscribed clay tablet from the Library of Ashurbanipal, Mesopotamia (near the modern city of Mosul in Iraq). The library was built between 668 BCE and 627 BCE as the king's personal reference library. The cuneiform tablets were intended for contemplation by the king and priests, and by other members of the learned class (Internet: [eduscapes.com/history/ancient/600bce](http://eduscapes.com/history/ancient/600bce)). They included government records, and documentation concerning law, medicine, science, magic, and legends. Papp's hand-sculpted clay slabs and the cuneiform tablets resemble pages from a book. I was particularly intrigued by the intricate patterning on an ancient clay tablet that is titled the *Venus astrological forecasts*. It has incised markings, lines and puncture holes; and this reminded me of the types of mark I had been making on book covers in my practical analysis of Martin.

Facing page:

Fig. 93 *Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqu*, clay tablet from Library of Ashurbanipal, Mesopotamia, Neo-Assyrian period, 3 pieces 17 x 9 x 2 cm. Image from [eduscapes.com](http://eduscapes.com)





### Notes from my practice

I described earlier (page 141) that when I made my artworks with old paper and book covers, I experienced a state of absorption and heightened awareness of sensation. This quiet state was achieved in a condition of solitary making, where external thoughts and disruptions were excluded. The small-scale works require a close and intimate way of working, with great care being given to the selection and positioning of materials, and to drawing delicate lines and marks. An example of my artwork is given here, where focused concentration was applied to both colour and surfaces (figs. 94 - 96), and this is followed by a commentary on that work.

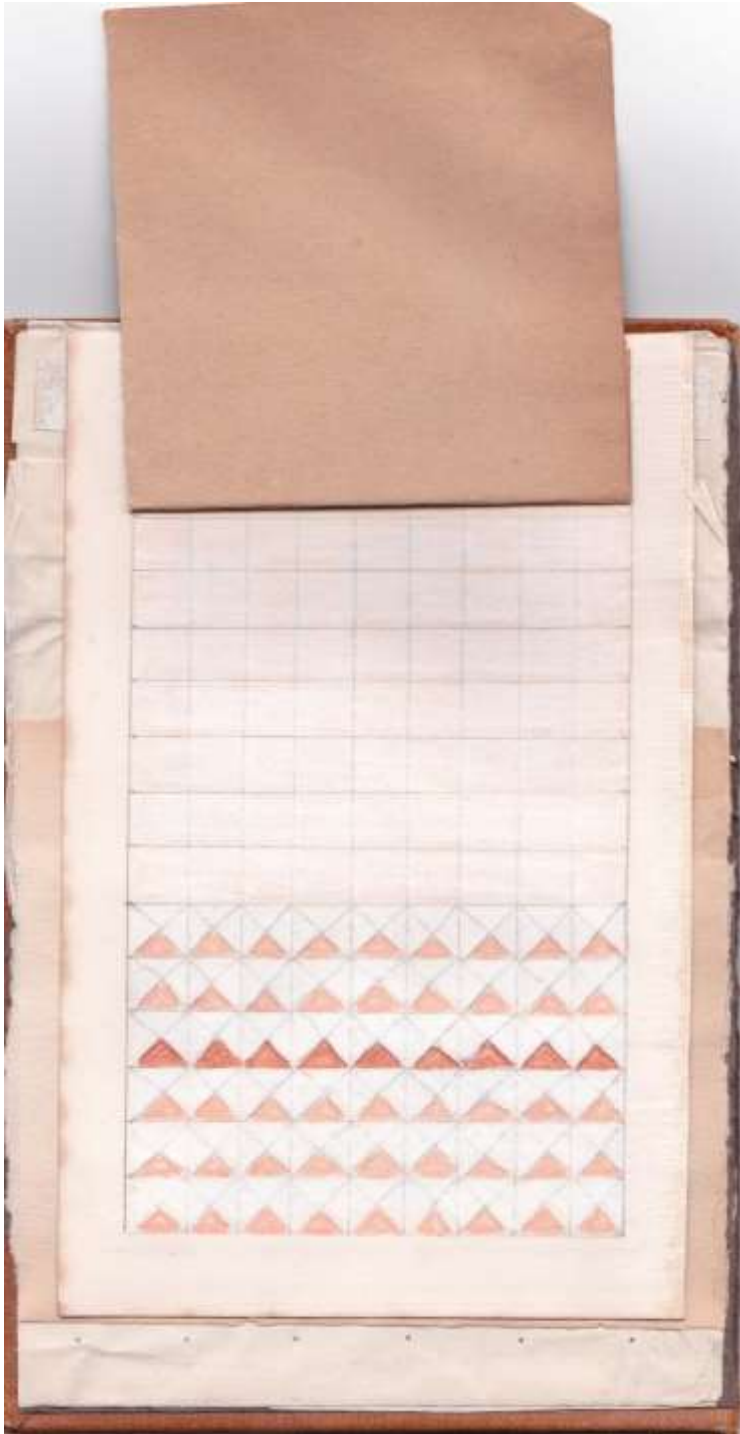
Facing page:

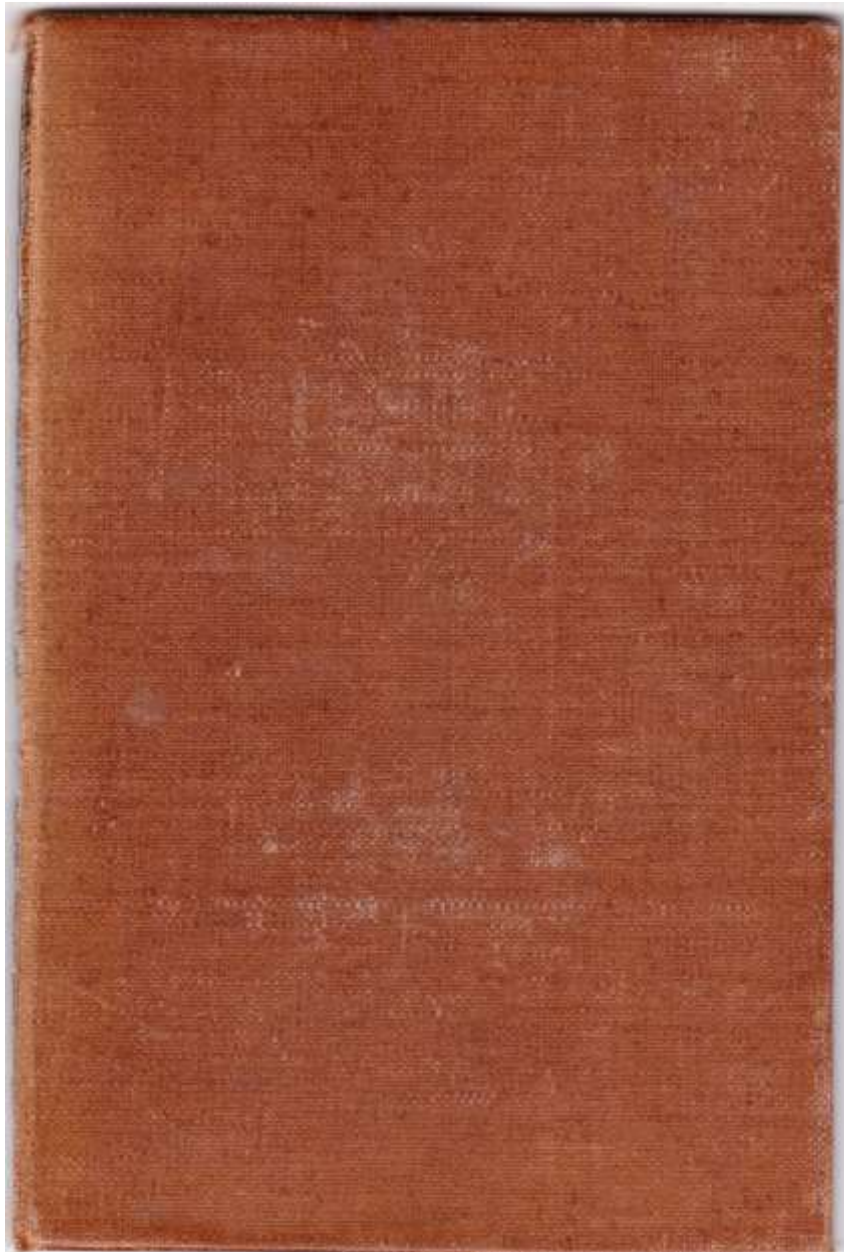
Fig. 94 *Untitled* (2015), Front view of paper and book cover, 20 x 13cm. Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 95 Front view of same artwork with tab lifted

Fig. 96 Cloth outer cover of same artwork







In my artwork shown in figures 94 - 96, I was particularly aware of the golden tone of the outer book cover that I had used as its basis, and attempted to recreate this tone in triangular forms delineated within a grid. I selected this cover, which is smooth and worn with fine scratches, when I had in mind the surfaces of Martin's work, which may be thought of in terms of having a 'patina'. This can be a change in surface that happens with age. Lawrence Alloway had described the surfaces of Martin's grid paintings as having 'a veil, shadow, or bloom' (page 100).

In my artwork, only one horizontal row of triangles just below a brown paper tab has a golden-brown colour similar to the book cover, while the remaining triangles have been shaded with pink pencil giving a subtle colour contrast. The grid continues under the tab, which can be lifted, but the triangles do not completely fill the grid to the top. The surface comprises different sections of paper, with slightly varying tones, and these have been layered. Photo-mounts extend out in the upper corners from under the surface of the paper showing how the paper has been attached. The lower edge has a row of six equally spaced dots pressed into the surface of the paper with a sharp-pointed pencil. One lower corner has been cut from the brown tab, which is folded in half to be envelope-like. Before scanning was used in libraries to check books out, books had a similar 'pocket' which would contain a marker slip with the book reference details.

When I have offered this artwork to other people, to handle in my workshops, my intention has been to invite close engagement. By

offering this very direct and close experience, allowing a very active engagement with the work, and even placing a responsibility on the participant (they become aware, through touch, of the fragility of some of the materials), I aim to communicate tacit knowledge, and to offer experience of a contemplative approach. Participants are free to deviate from my art-making methods, and are encouraged to experiment. In the following chapter I write about how some artists in South America were inviting an active and participatory engagement with their work.



## Chapter 10: Constructions and objects in Brazil and Venezuela

A major survey, which included Martin, was curated at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York, (17 September – 5 November 1989) titled *Abstraction, Geometry, Painting: selected Geometric Abstract painting in America since 1945*. That exhibition highlighted many differences in approach to Geometric Abstraction. I wrote earlier (see Chapter 3) that Martin developed her grid paintings through an investigation of arrangements of found materials, thereby making object-like works. In this chapter, I compare Brazilian artist Lygia Clark and some other members of the Neoconcrete group of artists with Martin through a shared influence, the work of Mondrian. The aim is to map the impact of European Modernism on both North and South America through Mondrian's work, placing Martin in a relationship to the South American artists never hitherto explicitly discussed.

I will discuss how Lygia Clark made *Bicho* objects around 1960 which the viewer could hold, thereby encouraging the active participation of the spectator. In these objects, line occurs as gaps between hinged metal geometric planes. Venezuelan artist Gego, who worked separately from the Neoconcrete artists, created immersive environments, *Reticulares*, in 1969, where lengths of wire were bound together by small twisted loops and hung as net-like 'drawings' filling the gallery. Visitors can walk within the installation, inspecting the various constellations of line. I compare these delicate linear and interwoven artworks by Gego with Martin's grids and constructions. My study of Lygia Clark and Gego also proposes some new insights into Martin's practice by investigating their shared emphasis on the response of the viewer, in addition to their experimentation with drawn or constructed line. Following my comparison between Martin and these South American artists, I give a related commentary on my practice. I explain how I made envelope-like artworks, which also explore some types of line, and which reflect on how these South American artists encouraged the viewer's active engagement.



Although Martin did not present her paintings in a way that the spectator could touch, or as immersive environments, she was very aware that her paintings could invite physical responses, and that viewers could respond in different ways at different times:

*Response to Art*

When we go to museums, we do not just look, we make a definite response to the work. As we look at it we are happier or more sad, more at peace or more depressed. A work may stimulate yearning, helplessness, belligerence or remorse. The cause of the response is not traceable in the work. An artist cannot and does not prepare for a certain response. He does not consider the response but simply follows his inspiration. Works of art are not purposely conceived. The response depends upon the condition of the observer.

(Martin, in Schwarz ed. 1991:18).

In Chapter 7 (page 144-145), I observed that Simon Gallery emphasised physicality in the artwork and in the spectator, positioning the viewer as a sentient, enquiring and mobile body (see page 145). Roger Cook experienced a nurturing or caring 'environment' in Martin's paintings (see Chapter 9, page 166).

Reflecting on my own experiments with presenting my work; encouraging various degrees of active participation from visitors, I noted mixed responses. On one occasion, in response to my invitation to artists and researchers to pick up my work, one person reported that they felt extremely anxious because the materials appear fragile (see Chapter 11, page 226 Timothy Taylor Gallery, May 2016).

**Mondrian**

Mondrian's paintings *Broadway Boogie- Woogie* (1942-43) and *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942-44) were exhibited in a retrospective at MOMA, New York in 1945, and were significant in the development of abstract geometric painting in North America at that time. Barbara Haskell wrote that 'Despite Martin's use of abstraction as a tool for revelation, her art aligned with the formalist aesthetic vanguard of the 1960s' (Haskell, 1992:7). The reception of Mondrian's late works in New York after they were exhibited varied between those who examined brush-strokes and other aspects of the paintings'

sensual facture, and others who read the paintings in terms of being mechanical or impersonal. Mondrian's placement of lines was intuitive, but his use of line stirred debate in the 1950s, dividing views about his use of 'exactness and measurement' to represent his impression of an 'ideal world' (Cooper, H, 2001:16-17). Martin spoke briefly, but positively, about her experience of Mondrian, giving this reply to Joan Simon's questioning for *Art in America* in 1996 (Simon, 1996:84-85):

**JS:** I'm reminded of the evolution of Mondrian's early work--the landscapes, his spiritual journey, his study of theosophy, the move to pure abstraction, yet with palpably felt, handmade lines. Not that your intentions or experiences were the same, but it seems as if you both had made a similar personal journey in your work. Did you know the work of Mondrian well?

**AM:** I responded to it. It made me feel good.

**JS:** In what sense do you consider your work spiritual?

**AM:** I think that our minds respond to things beyond this world. Take beauty: it's a very mysterious thing, isn't it? I think it's a response in our minds to perfection. It's too bad, people not realizing that their minds expand beyond this world.

Mondrian's practice, like that of Martin, has been described in terms of both spiritual thought and materiality (Krauss, *Grids*, 1978 in 1986:10-12). His following of Madame Blavatsky's line of Theosophy contributed toward a meditative abstract representation of nature. Art historian James Cuno drew attention to the material aspects of Mondrian's work, and its impact on the reception of his later paintings:

Too often we forget that paintings are made – that they are the result of countless decisions by the artist in response to the physical character of the materials. This is especially true of paintings such as those by Piet Mondrian. Their frequent reduction to design through reproductions has influenced the way we see them (in Cooper and Spronk, 2001:vii)

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, while artists in New York experimented with abstract forms, there was also an awareness of Mondrian's paintings in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but only through images. When an exhibition of *Concrete Art* was shown at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (22 January to 16 September 2013), curator

Gabriel Perez-Barreiro wrote that the interpretation of Mondrian's paintings by a number of South American artists resulted in each using a personal approach to achieve what they believed to be a continuation of Mondrian's work. Images of Mondrian's paintings were widely circulated through magazines and publications, but information regarding Mondrian's interest in Theosophy did not necessarily accompany them. Mondrian's impact on younger artists generated many different outcomes, partly dependent on whether the artists aimed to make paintings that resembled the images of Mondrian's paintings, or whether they adopted his beliefs (Perez Barreiro, in Museo Nacional de Arte Sofia and Turner 2013:21-23).

Art historian Paulo Venancio Filho curated an exhibition of Brazilian art at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh in 2015 titled *Possibilities of the Object: Experiments in Modern and Contemporary Brazilian Art* (6 March – 25 May 2015). In a catalogue essay for that exhibition, Filho attempted to define the term 'object'. He described it as 'neither painting nor sculpture', a category that has been open to new possibilities since the late 1950s. Significantly for my research, he notes its demand for proximity. By using 'neither/nor' to exclude what the object is not, he builds a flexible framework of practices and terms in which the object can be included (2015:53-55). Martin's constructions of found materials and her subsequent paintings which are pierced with rows of small nails extend from a painting practice as objects which are also not sculpture.

As an alternative to Concrete abstraction, Ferreira Gullar's Neoconcrete Manifesto, published in Rio in 1959 aimed to describe a new type of art, where objects occupy a space between painting and sculpture. More organic in form than the earlier abstract Concrete Art, these objects invited an active form of participation. The exhibition *Possibilities of the Object* showed how some Brazilian artworks invited active spectator participation. One such work was Oiticica's *B1 Bolide caixa 1 'Cartesiano'* (*B1 Bolide Box 1 'Cartesian'*) (1963), a painted yellow box with a front flap resting open. Oiticica intended the spectator to move some of the elements in the box: a glass-lined drawer containing yellow pigment, a glass panel painted yellow like a sliding lid, and an orange-painted shelf that slides out. An example of a similar work is shown in fig. 97. When I saw these for the first time at the Fruitmarket Gallery, I realised there was a connection

with the book cover artworks I had been making, where the viewer can lift flaps in the layered surfaces to reveal subtle drawn elements on the layers beneath, thereby participating in the work.



Fig. 97 Helio Oiticica, B11 Box Bolide 09, 1964, wood, glass and pigment 49.8 x 50 x 34 cm.  
Image: Tate © Projeto Helio Oiticica

Filho explained that Franz Weissmann's cube *Cubo Vasado* (*Unclosed Cube*) (1951), which appears 'impenetrable', could be opened with a 'slide and click', so that an action or gesture transforms the work. However, all that is revealed 'is the fact of openness'. The surprise is 'more in the absence of mystery than in any mystery that there possibly could have been' (Fruitmarket Gallery, 2015:57). He also explained that

The Neoconcrete object establishes a sense of intimacy through a proximity between itself and the viewer. This is an engagement that is both psychic and sensory; the viewer becomes aware of themselves not only in relation to the object but also, and especially, in relation to themselves. (Filho, 2015:62)

His description of the viewer's relationship with such an object mirrors my earlier accounts by Simon Callery and Roger Cook; experiences of intimacy, sensory engagement, and personal recognition. Recent works in the *Possibilities of the Object* exhibition included artwork by contemporary Brazilian artist Fernanda Gomes. She follows the lineage of Neoconcrete and Minimalist works, to make constructions with everyday found materials, which she usually paints white. Biographical information at the gallery stated that she emerged as part of the generation of Rio de Janeiro artists that also include Beatriz Milhazes, Ernesto Neto and Adriana Varejão. *Sem Título* (Untitled) (2013) is a narrow strip of cream-coloured cotton material wound on a reel, placed high on the wall in one corner of the gallery, and with a flattened strip of weave unfolding into a heap on the floor.

On a different occasion, at Alison Jacques Gallery, London in 2015, I saw another work by Gomes that reminded me of Oiticica's Box Bolide. This was also a box-like work with a flap (fig. 98). When Gomes' work was displayed in the exhibition *Organic Sculpture* at Alison Jacques Gallery, London (27 March – 23 May 2015) visitors were not permitted to touch the works, but the fabrication of the box allowed visitors to see elements inside the construction. Without being able to touch the work, the wall-mounted display at eye-level permitted me to peer inside, and I was also aware of the fragility of the card and paper materials.



Fig. 98 Fernanda Gomes, *Untitled*, (2013) Cardboard, tissue paper, paint, nails. Overall: 10.3 x 23 x 2.5 cm / 4 1/8 x 9 1/8 x 1 ins, Image: Alison Jacques Gallery

### Lygia Clark

Central to my investigation is the participatory practice of Lygia Clark, one of a group of Neoconcrete artists in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1959-60. This time frame corresponds to the time when Martin was moving from objects to grids. Clark fabricated objects in 1960 that consisted of hinged metal planes, and titled this type of object a *Bicho* (Bug), since it appeared to her to possess an organic or living quality. A *Bicho* can be manipulated into different forms by the viewer until it feels settled into a position, thus completing the work. I saw examples of this artwork at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds in an exhibition curated by Lisa Le Feuvre; *Lygia Clark: Organic Planes* (24 September 2014 – 4 January 2015). When I visited the exhibition, I saw one small gallery which contained several of Clark's *Bicho* sculptural works alongside framed collages of geometric forms from 1957 and a balsa wood maquette which showed the development of *Bicho Pássaro do Espaço* (*Bicho, Creature in Space*) (1960). Clark had intended that the spectator would have an active involvement, where the hinged planes could be moved into

numerous different configurations. Now, of course, protected and preserved in museum collections, they are presented safely out of reach, in one position, to the visitor. Gallery notes state that until 1963 Clark made around seventy *Bichos*, and after that she moved away from making objects, and toward therapeutic performances.

Information on display at the exhibition explained that Clark described a space that exists between the geometric planes of the *Bichos* as an 'organic line'. In Chapter 5 (page 98) I wrote that Kasha Linville described Martin's paintings as being similar to 'natural objects' and that she proposed an organic equivalent (like the veins on a leaf) to the grid paintings, (*Artforum*, June 1971:72). When art historian Anna Dezeuze (2006) made a comparison between Neoconcrete artist Lygia Pape's woodcuts and Frank Stella's painted lines, she wrote that 'the rigorous geometric composition' of Pape's woodcuts 'is contradicted by the porosity of the wood which affects the precision of the lines, giving the impression that the lines were traced by a trembling hand'. Dezeuze further stated that Pape attributed a 'fragile vibration' to the materials themselves (2006:6). These discussions do not directly reference Martin, but echo what can be said about how her paintings prompt ideas of fragility, evidenced by their facture and the delicate slightly uneven quality of her hand-drawn lines. I experienced this at first hand when I examined Martin's painting *Little Sister* (1962) (fig.1) at Tate, London in 2015 (see Chapter 6.2, page 127).

Dezeuze also argued that there is the 'familiarity of friendship' when the viewer manipulates Lygia Clark's *Bichos* or experiences Oiticica's *Box Bolides*, which she suggests can result in the work revealing new information, or conversely, offering resistance. In Chapter 11, I describe how I selected 'a family' of practice, a group of artists and researchers that I invited to attend my workshop at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London in May 2016. We engaged in discussion and art-making prompted by the presentation of my artworks and Gabriel de la Mora's work. In that workshop, we discussed how we could identify some methods by examining the artworks and the materials.



Fig. 99 Lygia Clark, *Bicho Pássaro do Espaço* (*Bicho, Creature in Space*) (1960). Aluminium, dimensions variable. Image: Michael Lelenthal





Fig.100 Lygia Clark, Study for 1960 sculpture 'Creature Passing Through Space' Balsa wood, dimensions variable, Photograph: Henry Moore Institute

## Gego

Gego began her exploration of line in the mid-sixties, producing drawings, prints, paintings and installations. She constructed a major work titled *Reticularia*, which was an installation of 'lines in space' in 1969. In a catalogue for an exhibition titled *Gego, Line as Object* (Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 24th July 2014 - 19th October 2014), Brigitte Kollé wrote:

Though Gego chose to employ a consistently modular system as the starting point for her works, the pieces have little in common with the rigidity and dogma of some geometric works that use industrial materials - as in Minimal Art, for example. On the contrary: using distortion, twisting, squeezing and stretching, Gego seemed to be putting the basic web-like, modular structure to the test.

(*No Day Without a Line* in Henry Moore Institute, 2014:23).

*Reticularea* comprises suspended net-like forms that create a tangled space that the viewer must traverse and negotiate. The webs of line can be suspended in a gallery or between buildings. Her various forms of woven line were intended to instil a sense of community and a relation to the environment (Kolle, in Henry Moore Institute, 2014: 27). Gego's linear works have been described as drawings without paper, where the spaces between the lines are as important as the lines themselves (Kolle, in Henry Moore Institute, 2004:23). When I visited the exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, I saw some examples of net-like forms suspended from the ceiling and placed on the floor. I looked up into, and through, the interwoven structures. I also saw another type of Gego's artwork; *Tejeduras* which she constructed in the late 1970s and 1980s. These woven paper pieces contain everyday materials such as the foil from cigarette packets. The weave – like that in the wire structures and drawings – also resembled the weave-type compositions made by Martin. Gego's exploration of line and space, however, springs from her early training in architecture.

My experience of viewing Gego's artworks, which also included more conventional two-dimensional drawings and paintings, was that, like Martin, she engaged in an intense investigation of fragile line, and its possibilities in a variety of media and different permutations. The viewer can participate in a way that has some similarity to viewing Martin's grid paintings. I moved close up to investigate small loops attaching the strands of wire in each larger structure, and moved back to see the whole. As well as moving around and under the nets of wire, I sat for a considerable time on the bench at the side of the gallery engaged in quiet contemplation of the forms. Like Martin's grids the delicate wire structures offer a sense of calm, but they also resemble some types of organic form. The small *Tejeduras* give the impression of being object-like, because although they were wall-mounted during my visit to the exhibition, they contain small objects and fragments of everyday materials. These seemed to me like Martin's constructions.



Fig. 101 Gego, 'Reticulárea (ambientación)' (1969) Wire, installed at Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Image: Paolo Gasparini / Archivo Fundación Gego



Fig. 102 Gego, *Tejedura* (Weaving) 89/13 (1989) Printed paper strip, plastic and ink, 21.2 x 18.4cm, Image: Fundacion Gego Collection at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

### Notes from my practice

In order to further investigate how I might encourage participation with my art practice, I made some artworks which resembled envelopes or packages. Reflecting on my experience of viewing the work of Martin and Imi Knoebel together at Dia: Beacon (see Chapter 6.1), I folded and reconfigured remnants cut from a paper grid. Some of these resembled envelopes or packages, and in my participatory workshop presentations of these pieces, I observed some people trying to open them (see Chapter 11, page 205).

To begin the new artworks, I first opened out some envelopes and items of cardboard packaging to look at their flattened shapes; the flat templates are known in packaging design as a 'net'. This term contributed to my thinking about these artworks in relation to Gego's *Reticularia*, Martin's grid paintings, and Lygia Clark's organic lines and folding hinges within the geometric *Bicho* objects. The envelope form appears simple, but is complex. In order to further investigate my thinking about these artists and my recent insights, I wanted to both replicate and use the marks found in packaging, and invite others to respond.

I described in Chapter 6.1 that Martin made grid compositions in multiple permutations. In my new 'envelope' artworks, I experimented with paper, including rice paper intended for the practice of Chinese calligraphy, to make 'envelopes' with different variations (fig. 103). A pre-existing irregular red printed line runs along some edges of the rice paper, which I have selected, isolated and incorporated into the works.

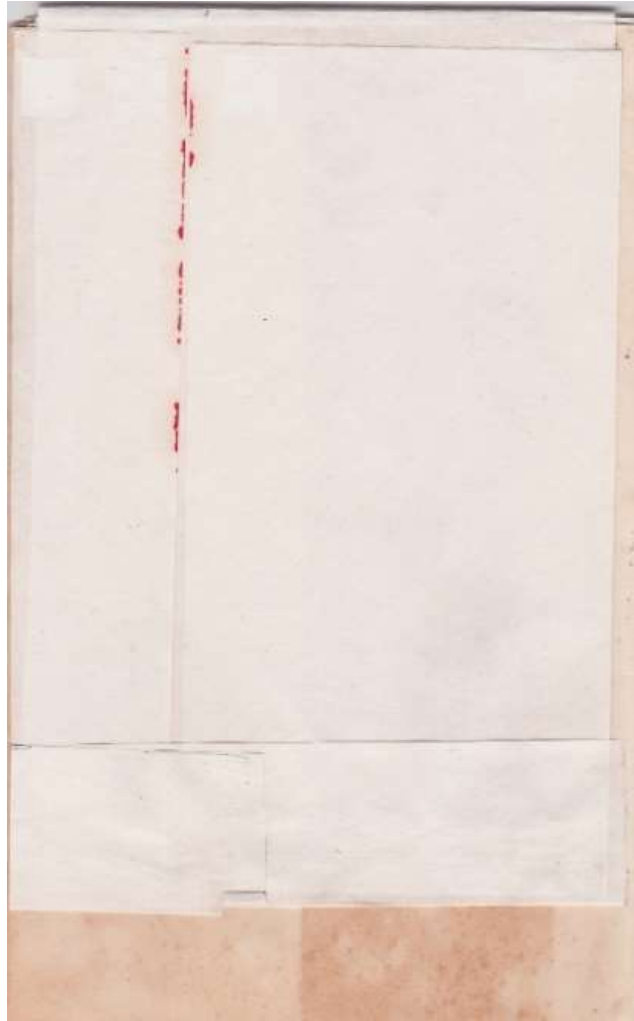
One response to this printed line was that the viewer assumed I had made it myself, and this prompted further discussion about my experience of selecting rice paper and its original purpose for practising calligraphy.

I wanted to emphasise the considered placement and composition of different elements. I sometimes combined old discoloured book pages with new white rice paper, to make a tonal contrast. The incorporation of the red ink line as a found mark was a development in my practice after having first isolated an accidental green ink line in earlier experimentation (page 133). Incorporation of the existing marks on materials was confirmed as a method when I found out more about the work of Gabriel de la Mora and the pre-existing ink stains and residues on metal print plates (see Chapter 8.2. and pages 227-228).

When I made these artworks, the methods of folding and placement were intended to be experienced as being like meditative exercises, but they are also a method that a viewer can follow by handling the work. Another type of marking on these artworks was when I replicated the stitching-holes of book margins by using pencil to draw a repetitive dot-dash-dot pattern. The 'envelopes' have lines that comprise the edges of the paper, pre-existing print lines and hand-drawn lines.

Facing page:

Fig. 103 *Envelope form*, 2016. Rice paper and old book pages, 22 x 14cm.  
Artwork and image Sharon Phelps



I designed the artworks to resemble ordinary, functional envelopes in terms of their size, shape and weight, so that a viewer may feel inclined to handle them. We tend to treat envelopes casually, as functional, disposable items in everyday life. I attempted to encourage a more careful manual investigation of my artworks through the use of noticeably fragile materials; a visible vulnerability. As noted above, this sometimes actually discouraged people from handling them. When this artwork was discussed during a seminar, it prompted discussion about ephemeral art, and we recalled some occasions where people who had not experienced that type of artwork before had accidentally disposed of it.

In the exhibition *Possibilities of the Object*, Filho noted that the act of opening is a surprise, and that the object need not contain anything (see page 181). The openings in my artworks are flaps or a layer of paper, which may reveal another layer or a drawn composition. Some of my artworks have several layers, like pages in a book. The 'envelope' artworks may have soft thickness where paper is layered inside, so that they feel like padded envelopes. Others are paper-thin or stiffened with card. A 'flap' may not open and can simply refer to the act of opening; haptic familiarity, from our everyday handling of envelopes.

A further work (shown in figs 104 and 105) has been entirely made with re-used paper. Side 1 has a section of semi-transparent paper placed over plain paper. Because the paper was taken from other work to be re-positioned in this work it has an x-shaped fold which is off-centre and to the left. The vertical broken line does not infer stitch or weave, but indicates an 'opening'.

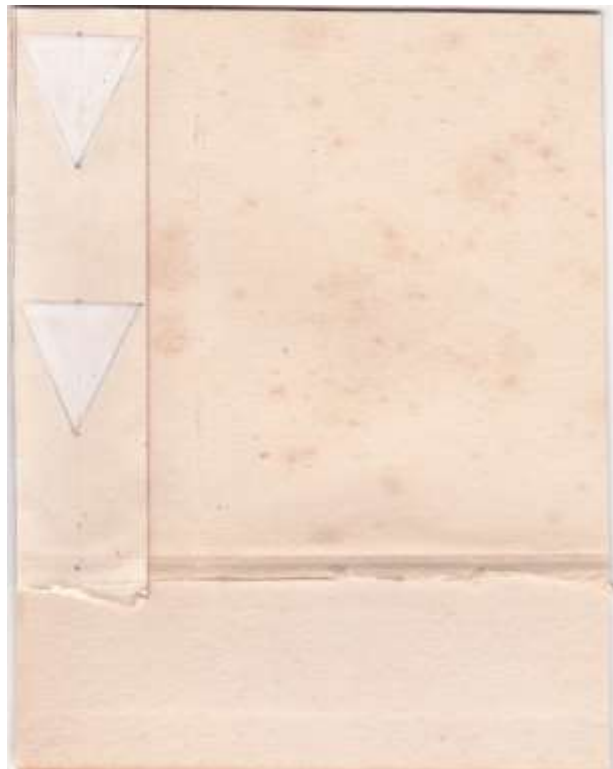
The likeness of this artwork to an envelope suggests that the triangles on the other side of the work could be read as arrows on an ordinary packaging envelope. On a packaging envelope, a thin opening strip is often indicated by arrows to show where the package can be torn open. The small size and fragile materials of this work are intended to make it resemble a meditative object, like a Tantric drawing (see Chapter 2.4). This is reinforced by the two triangles on side 2, which resemble the symbols used in Tantra painting (see fig 13, page 35). There is a deliberate play in this work between everyday object (an envelope) and a meditative object (Tantra diagram), so that the work may simultaneously carry these contradictory associations. Although it has been made as part of my investigation of a mindful or 'special' practice, it also refers to a utilitarian and entirely disposable item. However, I am aware that a viewer may not readily interpret the artworks in the same way.

Facing page:

Fig. 104 *Untitled* (2016) Pencil on paper. 11.5 x 9cm. (side 1) Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps

Fig. 105 Side 2 of the same drawing





## Summary

My comparison demonstrates a relationship between the work of Martin and that of some contemporaneous Neoconcrete artists in Brazil through developments in geometric abstraction informed by Mondrian. I also discussed the overlapping or convergent aspects of the otherwise very different practices of Martin and Gego. By planning new work of my own, I was able to explore, elucidate and re-enact aspects of these artists' relationships to line, form, materials and their audiences. I reflected on their artistic engagement with this type of practice by making new practice, which examined line and also invited the viewer to participate with the work. I highlighted that the clear emphasis, in the work of Gego and Clark, on the active response of the viewer was something that Martin also espoused, despite her not explicitly inviting the same kind of physical engagement implicit in the work of the South American artists. This focus on the active participation of the spectator informed my decisions about how to present my work, so that I offered it to be handled by the viewer. I also described how contemporary artist Fernanda Gomes reminds the viewer of the experience of touch through her use of everyday materials. A study of these artists contributed to my thinking about some elements of my compositions; for example where sections of an artwork can be opened, or marks that imply an opening.

An intense exploration of line by Martin, Clark and Gego led me to investigate different types of line, and one instance of this was the found red broken print line on rice paper. Lygia Clark and Gego, like Martin invite closeness and intimacy between their artwork and the spectator, although they do this differently. I described how Lygia Clark invites the spectator to hold and manipulate the *Bichos*, and that Gego creates a spatial environment comprising interwoven lines. I offered an example of where the tremor of Martin's hand-drawn lines and the delicacy of her interwoven pencil-drawn grids, despite their geometry, is reminiscent of that found in organic linear forms, which one may also compare with the 'organic' lines in Clark's *Bichos* (which she likened to small creatures).

Significantly to my argument, this study foregrounds a new context in which to examine Martin's art practice, which is in a relationship with these South American artists. I

have discussed how Martin, Clark and Gego all produced work not adequately described by the labels of 'painting' or 'sculpture', but which perhaps fit better into the 'object' category defined by Filho. I wrote that when Filho attempted to define the term 'object', he described it as 'neither painting nor sculpture', a category that he described as having been open to new possibilities since the late 1950s (see page 180). When he argued that objects demand the proximity of the spectator, I have explained this in terms of the viewer's response and engagement encouraged by Martin's work, and the active participation invited by Clark and Gego. A shared Modernist lineage may be traced from all three artists back to the hand-made geometric compositions of Mondrian, which directly inspired these three distinct but related outcomes, spanning North and South America.

## **Chapter 11: Presentations of my artworks and responses**

I presented examples of my ongoing practical research by bringing actual artworks on occasions when practice was discussed, and I invited others to engage with them. The small scale of the artworks is intended to encourage people to pick them up and look closely, thereby mirroring the close relationship between artwork and spectator that Martin's paintings offer (see Chapter 9). I participated in practice-led symposia and conferences by presenting a selection of work, and inviting others to respond.

Separately, I organised three workshops, where I provided a selection of different types of paper and card for art-making, prompting discussion and experimentation around art practice. Language can struggle to adequately convey art work; in the context of my workshops, art-making is available alongside verbal dialogue to enable some practical communication that cannot be shared through language.

I have intended my artworks to be lightweight and portable, so that they can more practically be taken to presentations, enabling me to further evaluate my methods through the responses of others. In the workshop setting, I did not use sound or video recording because I did not want to inhibit discussion or art-making, and individuals have not been identified. At seminars during my preliminary research for MRes, some students had expressed concern about recordings. This also happened when I spoke with Simon Callery at his studio (see page 144). Instead, I report anecdotally on what I remember from discussions and my notes; thereby incorporating my interpretation and the general mood of the discussions. Other researchers may reach an agreement with artists and researchers that could allow recordings to take place, dependent upon appropriate ethical considerations (see page 242). My presentations and workshops are presented chronologically, each followed by a summary of findings, with conferences and symposia first, and then workshops that I organised. The different types of presentation described in this chapter informed the development of my workshop methodology (see Chapter 12).

**Diagram showing how my practice was presented in different contexts**

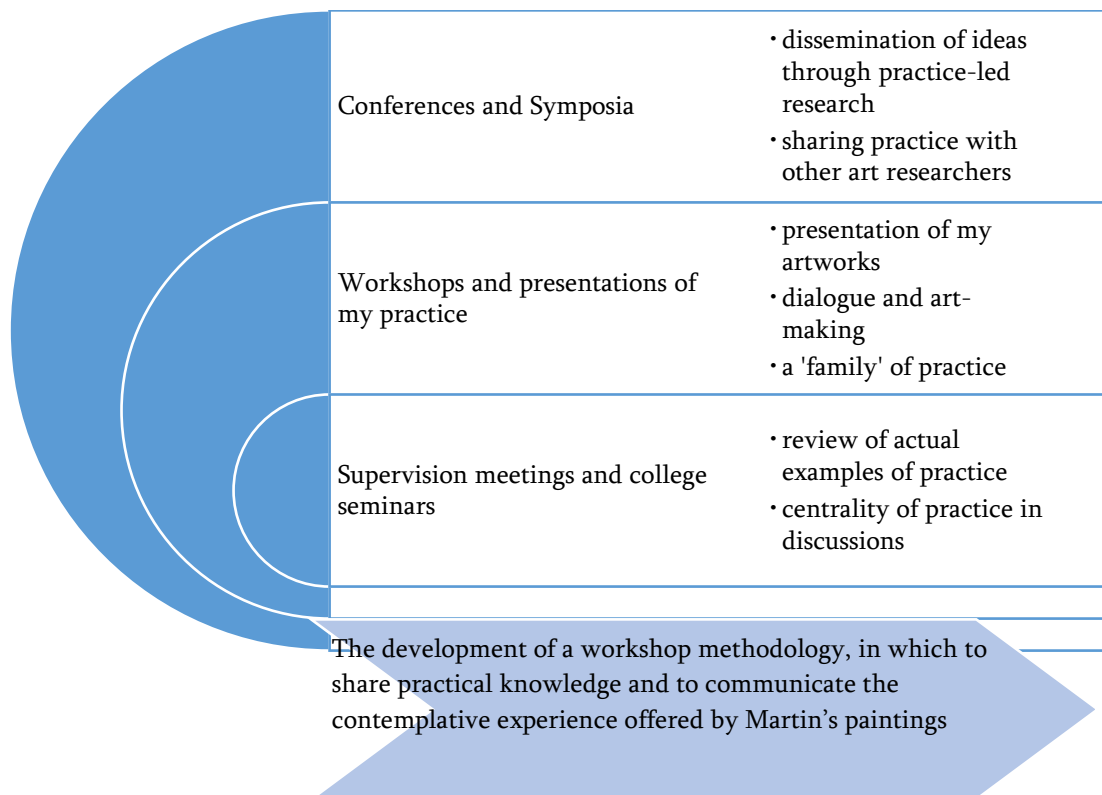


Fig. 106 Sharon Phelps, diagram showing presentations of practice, and how they fed into the development of the workshop methodology

## 11.1 Conferences and symposia

### Conference presentation at 'Sensingsite: Transcribing Site', Parasol Unit, London, May 2014

I presented an overview of Agnes Martin's practical methods at a one-day conference *Sensingsite: Transcribing Site* for UAL researchers on 19 May 2014 at the Parasol Unit, London. The conference was organised by staff from London College of Communication, and some researchers were specialised in art forms that experiment with sound. In order to engage with others in the field of practice-led artistic research, I brought selected examples of my practical experimentation. A variety of artworks which had been made by a method of reconfiguration were handed to other artists and researchers, and responses were invited. (Examples of this work are shown in figs. 71 – 72, page 123 and figs. 83 – 84, page 149).

These works are reasonably fragile in construction, and can fall apart or deteriorate over a short time. They are provisional, so that I can re-configure them later if I wish, but in a settled form when shown to others. This method of presenting practice was informed by my engagement in the Visual Symposium at Beaconsfield in April 2013, where practice was exhibited and discussed. It was also prompted by my earlier reading of Rebecca Fortnum's study which she made in 2005 concerning 'visual intelligence' (see Chapter 1.2).

In this presentation at the Parasol Unit, one researcher tested my reaction by separating the layers of an artwork, and asked whether the spectator could pull the work apart. I had already described how my artworks are pulled apart and re-positioned during the making process. My intention is that by providing materials for art-making, each researcher can try different methods that might lead them to a better understanding of practice. In a supervision meeting after that presentation, I discussed the earlier confusion at the conference about who could reconfigure the artworks, and to what extent. In my workshop methodology, art materials are provided so that participants can carry out their own experimentation.

The notion of care in handling artworks was raised in a later discussion at a college seminar when I brought examples of my book cover works. One art researcher was willing to closely examine the artworks after first observing how I handled them. I had not expected hesitancy from others, but the later selection of book cover works, which were not shown at the Parasol Unit, are especially fragile, having delicate paper and hinged flaps that could tear when lifted.

Other researchers at the *Sensingsite* conference responded to my invitation to handle the artworks by taking them, passing them around to others and looking between layers. Some stated that this direct handling of artwork was unusual in their personal experience. I provided a table with art materials that researchers were free to use, so that they could not only test methods of art-making I had described, but also devise their own methods. The table was placed at the back of the room, and left unsupervised so that I did not directly observe what people were making. Several researchers made their own artworks by using the materials differently to my methods, including putting pieces of paper inside an envelope and puncturing holes with a hole punch. By leaving the table unattended, I absented myself while others were making these artworks. However, this arrangement did leave people free to come and go, and not be observed, so allowed them anonymity to experiment without any sense of appraisal. There had been some dialogue earlier, when my artworks were passed around, so that responses were offered prior to art-making.

**Summary of responses:**

- One researcher tested my reaction by separating the layers of an artwork, and asked whether the spectator could pull the work apart.
- One art researcher was willing to closely examine the artworks after first observing how I handled them, being anxious about handling fragile materials.
- Other researchers held the artworks and looked between the layers.
- Some people stated that this direct handling of artwork was unusual in their personal experience.
- Several researchers made their own artworks by using the materials or tools differently to my methods. One example of this when a researcher used a hole punch to make multiple holes in paper. This was then placed inside an existing envelope. In my experimentation I had made 'envelope' forms, but this researcher used it in its everyday form as a container for a new artwork.



**Presentation of practice: Chelsea College of Arts, London, November 2015**

On 18 November 2015 I presented a selection of artworks made during that year. They were displayed across two rooms at Chelsea College of Arts. This one-day presentation was open to research staff and students, and was to invite responses to my practice in a research setting. A long table was placed in the centre of the larger of the rooms, with chairs set around it. For those not familiar with Agnes Martin's paintings, I brought a Tate exhibition catalogue from the 2015 retrospective. On the table were a number of book cover artworks which could be picked up. I intended that by making the works available to hold I would parallel Martin's invitation to come close to the surface of her paintings. In a second smaller room, there was a box with cards to invite written responses, although all responses were either given verbally or later by email.

In a discussion with researchers later in the day it was decided that the artworks extended into the surrounding space – ledges, wall, table, room - to take in the pre-existent features of the room, especially the improvised features such as the holes in the wall and patches of paint. Book cover artworks were propped on ledges and along the walls at floor level, with labels requesting that they be handled with care, and a single work was wall-mounted. This last work was hung directly opposite a window that looked out over trees toward the river, and I selected it for the reason that it seemed to mirror the outside view, being a small vertical rectangle divided across the centre with one section having a pale wash of green ink. The works on ledges and along the floor were interchangeable with those on the table, and I moved them around a number of times to experiment with placement taking into account the different features and imperfections in the room.

In the smaller room were drawings and a cardboard box with irregular sides, relating to my investigation of found objects. I left books with information about Lygia Clark, Gego and contemporary artist Fernanda Gomes on a table. The cardboard box was displayed on a low ledge almost at floor level beneath a window. My only intervention to the materials of the box was to lightly cover the webbed brown tape with pale coloured pencil marks, an example of having selected a material, but highlighting it in a subtle way to draw attention to the mesh as a found element. The drawings were placed together on a long table. They consist of ink lines repeatedly traced around a small

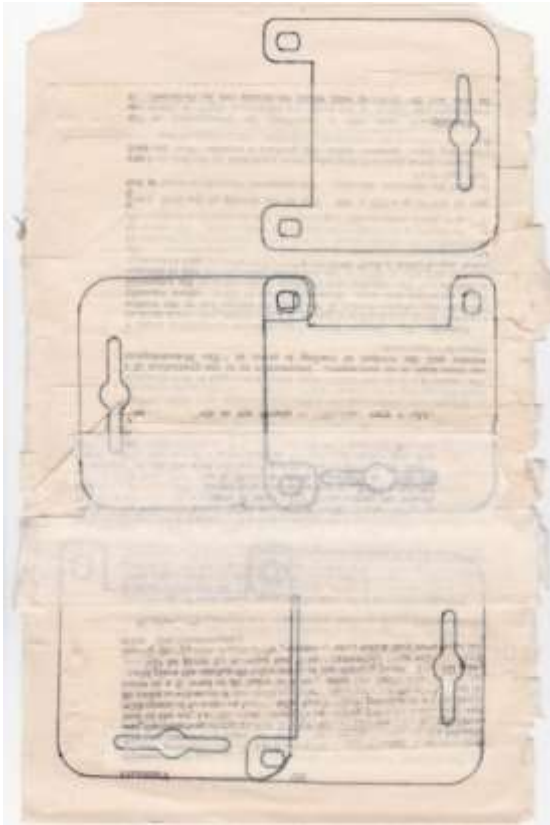
plastic tab in found packaging, arranged in multiple and overlapping positions over surfaces that comprise masking tape over printed book pages. In the process of making, some of the tape had been peeled back and re-positioned, so that the text was not easily readable. I discovered that when I carefully removed the tape from the book pages, some of the printed text had transferred to it. I had re-positioned some of the faded and imperfect text by turning the tape over or moving it to another section of the page so that it overlaid other print. Some viewers of these drawings described this work as a palimpsest, which is the partial erasure and re-inscription of an older surface. In fig.107, there are images of both sides of one drawing.

Facing page:

Fig. 107 *Untitled* (2015), Front and back views of a drawing on tape over a printed page.

Each page

24 x 15cm. Artworks and images by Sharon Phelps.



### **Dialogues about the presentation**

During the afternoon four research students attended with my supervisory team. A lively discussion arose around the table set out in the larger room, prompted by the invitation to handle the artworks in this setting. The role of the artworks and how they would be represented in my research started a dialogue about the viewing experience. Some respondents expressed unease about the setting for my presentation in the college, and therefore an art institution, which prevented their experience from being one of intimacy. Other possible contexts for showing my work were suggested, and this included showing work in my studio. In addition to my artworks testing the limits of painting, we considered whether the presentation was testing the edge of display, as a social catalyst which is able to provoke discussion, as this appeared to be the case.

Printed text and embossed designs on the book covers elicited two types of response; it was accepted by some as part of the substrate of the work, or became a distraction for others. My position changed during the making of the work; so that in the first works I had covered over printed text, but retained other types of embossed patterning. In later works I chose to retain pre-existing print as a form of marking on the surface. This change of thinking came about during discussion at a supervision meeting, when lettering was considered as pre-existent marks. One example where an embossed book title is visible is shown in fig.112, which was an artwork submitted to the Artbox auction and exhibition at the Fold Gallery, London (see page 223).

When the book cover works had been positioned on ledges, one respondent felt unsure about moving them. Others questioned whether the books on the table and floor could be moved to different positions, to be grouped differently, and we tried this. There was some concern about the disfigurement of books to use them in artworks. Other responses were that in layered works or works with flaps, the act of opening is a surprise. This response confirmed a statement in Chapter 10 (see page 181), when Filho was describing some of the Brazilian objects. No respondents described feeling that the delicate or fragile materials inhibited picking the works up, but one person described feeling unsure about whether layers could be lifted or if they were stuck down.

There was discussion about whether a special container or box could be used to make the artworks portable and to be unpacked from, but it was suggested by some people that this could make the artworks a single collection rather than separate works. During the presentation, I considered whether to display the works in a box, which would require instructions so that viewers would take them out to view them. On three other separate occasions when I offered the book cover works in a box to individuals, but not in a workshop or research context, those people were happy to examine the artworks carefully one at a time. These people described surprise at seeing an unfamiliar type of work. The delicate construction and fragile materials prompted them to handle the works with great care and they suggested that the artworks should be framed or collated together into a book. One respondent who looked at these artworks spread them out on a flat surface and described the old paper as taking the ‘niceness’ (texture and qualities of old stained paper) from books and putting it all together.

The images below (fig. 108) show two different views of a book cover artwork, with a flap closed and then pulled down, so that a pencil-drawn line composition is visible on the inside of the flap. The flap is quite fragile in the way that it is attached to the main composition of discoloured paper on one side of a book cover. Since the flap is placed rather than fixed in a closed position, a researcher described to me in an earlier seminar meeting that the flap quivers when it is handled, emphasising the delicate nature of the construction. This artwork is a selection of old paper on a book cover, where I have used the tones of pre-existing discolouration. Apart from the lines drawn inside the flap, there is only light red shading along the top edge of the upper layer, with the edge slightly curved outward where the page was detached from a book.

Facing page:

Fig. 108 *Untitled* (2015) Pencil on paper and book cover, with two views to show flap closed and open, 21 x 13cm. Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps



During my presentation, a researcher asked: ‘Are the artworks a device to activate conversation about Agnes Martin, and to draw attention to her work?’. My answer was: ‘Yes, but it is also to look closely at the methods of an earlier artist through practice in order to understand them, and to use that knowledge to generate new practice. I aim to share this knowledge with others through practice’. This led to a suggestion that the purpose of making an artwork can be to ‘apprehend’ another artwork, and that perhaps the only way to understand an artwork is to make another artwork. My practical analysis of Martin’s artwork attempts this through a re-enactment of her methods to both understand her artwork and make new work. I also explained Dore Ashton’s account of Martin’s attitude to artwork; that of artwork being work in an active sense; that of making, an attitude that arose from Martin’s interest in Chinese painting (Ashton, in Hayward Gallery, 1977: 8). (See Chapter 7, page 139).

A written response was received after the presentation from a researcher who was interested in how I would choose to display my artworks within a research context. Since they had recently been to see the Agnes Martin exhibition at Tate, London in 2015, this person described attending more directly to aspects of my work that were recognised from Martin’s paintings. The researcher recounted walking around Martin’s paintings to look from different positions, and that this was something similar to picking my works up to look at them from different angles. However, with my works this person was also testing which parts could be moved, revealing other parts of the composition, which they described as a surprise or playful element. They further described this as pleasing, but different from the experience of Martin’s works. The layers in my artworks that can be lifted to reveal subtle marking were felt to allow the respondent to share in the viewpoint of the maker.

### Summary of responses

- Researchers decided that the artworks extended into the surrounding space, taking in the pre-existent features of the room.
- Some observations of the drawings on tape over printed text described this work as a palimpsest, which is the partial erasure and re-inscription of an older surface.
- Some respondents expressed unease about the setting for my presentation in the college, and therefore an art institution, which prevented their experience from being one of intimacy.
- Other possible contexts for showing my work were suggested, and this included showing work in my studio.
- In addition to my artworks testing the limits of painting, we considered whether the presentation was testing the edge of display, as a social catalyst which is able to provoke discussion.
- Printed text and embossed designs on the book cover artworks elicited two types of response; it was accepted by some as part of the substrate of the work, or became a distraction for others.
- When the book cover works had been positioned on ledges, one respondent felt unsure about moving them. Others questioned whether the books on the table and floor could be moved to different positions, to be grouped differently.
- There was some concern about the disfigurement of books to use them in artworks.
- Other responses were that in layered works or works with flaps, the act of opening is a surprise.
- No respondents described feeling that the delicate or fragile materials inhibited picking the works up, which I had wrongly expected, but one researcher was unsure about whether layers could be lifted or if they were stuck down. When following this workshop methodology, the person conducting the research can look for expectations that are not met, and then note when this happens.
- During discussion it was questioned whether a special container or box could be used to make the artworks portable and to be unpacked from, but it was



suggested by some researchers that this could make the artworks a single collection rather than separate works.

- On separate occasions when I offered the book cover works in a box to individuals, and not in a workshop or research context, those people were content to examine the artworks carefully one at a time. These people described surprise at seeing an unfamiliar type of work.
- The delicate construction and fragile materials prompted individuals (separately from this presentation) to handle the works with great care and they suggested that the artworks should be framed or collated together into a book.
- One respondent (separately from this presentation) who looked at these artworks spread out on a flat surface described the old paper as taking the ‘niceness’ (texture and qualities of old stained paper) from books and putting it all together.
- A researcher at this presentation had described to me in an earlier seminar that a flap on a book cover artwork quivered when handled, emphasising the delicate nature of the construction.
- A researcher questioned whether my artworks are a device to activate conversation about Agnes Martin, and to draw attention to her work.
- A suggestion was offered that the purpose of making an artwork can be to ‘apprehend’ another artwork, and that perhaps the only way to understand an artwork is to make another artwork.
- One respondent was interested in how I would choose to display my artworks within a research context.
- A researcher had recently been to see the Agnes Martin exhibition at Tate, London in 2015, and then described attending more directly to aspects of my work recognised from Martin’s paintings.
- A researcher had walked around Martin’s paintings to look from different positions, and described doing something similar by picking my works up to look at them from different angles.
- A researcher described testing which parts of my artworks could be moved, revealing other parts of the composition, which were described as a surprise or playful element.

- The playful element was felt to be pleasing, but different from the experience of Martin's works.
- The layers in my artworks that can be lifted to reveal subtle marking were felt to allow a viewer to share in the viewpoint of the maker.

**Conference ‘Interactions with the Real’ at Royal Holloway University, London, 21 November 2015**

On 21 November 2015, I presented a selection of book cover artworks at an annual practice-based research conference organised by Royal Holloway postgraduate students. The conference was open to postgraduate students, researchers, writers, performers and artists from all disciplines. This interdisciplinary event provided a space for creative dialogue between practitioners and academic researchers. The organisers described the theme of the conference as ‘new ways of thinking the real’. My contribution took the form of practice in which I aimed to draw attention to Martin’s method of transcription and her use of every-day and discarded materials. The organisers particularly welcomed presentations and submissions with a participatory element, including workshops, led discussions, artwork for display or performance-based presentations.

Researchers were following a programme of spoken presentations, with short interludes where they could look at examples of art practice. Since there were only small periods of time outside the spoken presentations, I did not provide a selection of art-making tools and materials, but displayed twenty small book cover works on a large table in a room alongside practical research by other PhD researchers. My artworks were available to hold, and researchers came throughout the day to examine the artworks and to engage in conversation. Researchers noted that the artworks appeared to be fragile, but they were still willing to pick them up. They did not question the methods I had used, or discuss transcription, but instead were intrigued by the aged paper and my choice of book covers as a support.

Researchers who came to the area where my artworks were set out mostly tended to spend time quietly looking at the book cover surfaces, rather than engage in discussion. However, a photography researcher described a parallel between my surfaces and that of a palimpsest; re-inscription of a surface where the earlier writing has been erased. This was a response described earlier by others looking at the copper leaf drawing (figs 90– 91, see page 162) and also the drawing over tape on printed text (fig. 107, page 204). This researcher described how a direct engagement with art practice was appealing and, in a

later written communication, described a mode of presentation in which collections of photographs are tied together in stacks and displayed as an archive of work.

The set-up of separate tables for individual practitioners across several rooms encouraged people to walk through the building to browse at the displays of practice, but not to spend a long time at each display. Time was also scheduled to fit around spoken presentations and practical workshops in another part of the building. This setting gave researchers the freedom to spend time looking without an expectation for long discussions. Positive responses pointed out the attention I had given towards the use of materials and subtle marks on the surfaces.

### **Summary of responses**

- Researchers were interested in the fragile materials, and they were willing to pick them up to look closely, remarking on the aged paper and my choice of book covers as a support.
- Researchers did not question the methods I had used, or discuss transcription.
- A photography researcher described a parallel between my surfaces and that of a palimpsest; re-inscription of a surface where the earlier writing has been erased.
- A researcher described this direct engagement with art practice as appealing.
- A researcher suggested an alternative type of presentation, like photographs tied together in stacks.
- Researchers remarked upon the attention I had given towards the use of materials and subtle marks on the surfaces.

**Symposium ‘Sense, Experiment, Surprise, Understanding’ at Nottingham Trent University,  
21 – 22 January 2016**

Speakers at this symposium had been encouraged to address problems that can arise when conducting practice-led research, and the call for papers asked artistic researchers to consider the following topics:

*What research tradition am I part of – does it have any rules? How can I do justice to my experiences in reporting my research? How can I build claims to knowledge from experiences/ artefacts/ actions? What are valid material forms for my thesis?*

I brought a small portfolio of drawings with ink drawn around tabs on tape and book cover artworks to share with practitioners, but I did not present a paper. Opportunities to discuss practice outside the schedule for paper presentations was limited, but some researchers spent time looking at my artworks between presentations. One reason for my attendance at this conference was to better understand how practice is enacted by others in their research, and to see how they presented their practical research in a paper. I also wished to understand how their practice was described and how it fitted together with the written component in their practice-led research projects. Two researchers, who both used sound and performance, gave actual demonstrations of practice in their presentation, and one other researcher handed a small card to each attendee with a phrase printed from her research material. I felt that being handed a small physical example of her practice emphasised what she was explaining in words and images.

Two textile practitioners commented on the layers in my artworks, which they described to be veil-like, and they linked this to ideas of the body. One of these was familiar with Lenore Tawney’s weavings, and observed a similarity between those weavings and my artworks. This researcher did not know that Tawney had an intimate relationship with Martin, and had not previously connected the two artists. They were able to establish a connection between Tawney’s drawings and woven sculpture pieces and Martin’s paintings by looking at my artworks, which were not grid works, but drawings and arrangements of old paper on book covers.

**Summary of responses**

- Two textile practitioners commented on the layers in my artworks, which they described to be veil-like, and they linked this to ideas of the body.
- One textile researcher was familiar with Lenore Tawney's weavings, and observed a similarity between those weavings and my artworks.
- One researcher's response confirmed that a contemplative experience similar to that offered by Martin's paintings or Tawney's drawings and woven objects was available by looking at my book cover works and drawings.

## 11.2 Workshops

### **Artist workshop and exhibition: ForestCentre Plus, Edinburgh, January 2014**

On 18 January 2014, I set up a workshop in a room adjacent to an exhibition titled *Discardboard*, where artists had been invited in an open callout to submit works made from cardboard. The exhibition took place at an artist-run space, ForestCentre Plus (a former jobcentre) in Edinburgh. This was the first presentation of my folded and reconfigured works (figs 109 and 110, page 218) and they were placed on a small table close to the entrance of the exhibition, where they were available for people to pick up. Artists were invited to attend my workshop by the exhibition organiser, with the number of participants limited to eight people so that we could work closely together within a small group.

These participants were people I had not previously met, and were from specialisms that included architecture, furniture-making, textiles and fine art. Our art and design practices gave us a shared language with which to communicate our experiences of making among the group. I organised one further workshop after this without making my own selection of participants (Artbox, at the Fold Gallery, August 2015), but in a third workshop (Timothy Taylor gallery, May 2016) I made a particular selection of people who were artist researchers known to me; a ‘family’ of practice (see Chapter 12, pages 241-242).

The two-hour workshop was preceded by an hour in which participants were arriving, and when we gave our attention to the art-making methods employed in the exhibited works. This study of methods was an important aspect of the workshop and I was interested to discover how these methods might inform our art-making. One example of a method that I observed among the exhibited works, and which was similar to my experimentation, was of tiny piercings through a large sheet of cardboard packaging. This delicate work was painted white and displayed on the wall, making a tough material (cardboard) appear fragile. We could also interpret the artworks through discussion with some of the exhibiting artists.

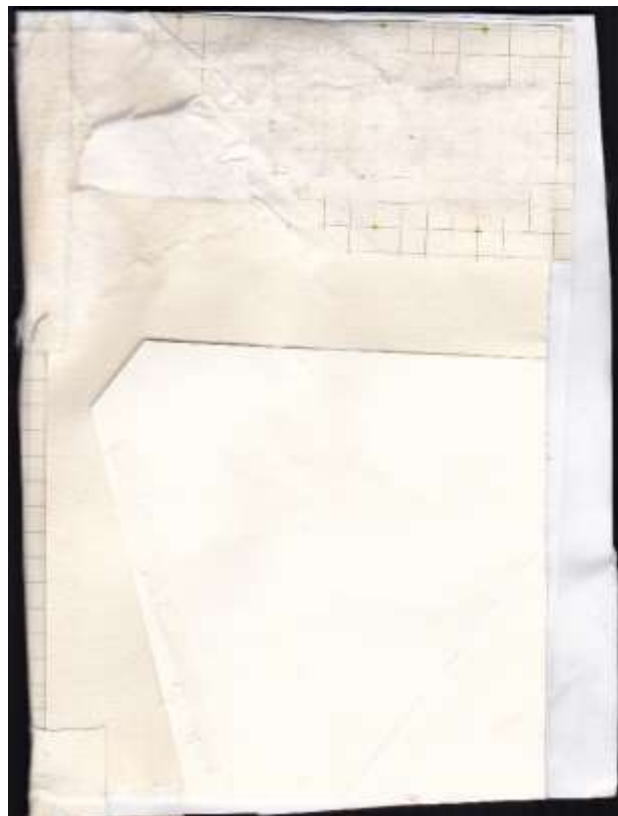
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Fig. 109 *Untitled* (2013) Paper and card, 15 x 12cm

Fig. 110 *Untitled* (2013) Paper and card, 15 x 12cm

Artwork and images by Sharon Phelps





There were two tables and, because of the small room, they were placed apart from each other, one behind the other. I gave a short introduction to my practice to explain its part in my study of Agnes Martin, with particular emphasis on the folding and reconfiguration methods I had discovered while conducting my practical analysis of her work. A selection of my folded works, which resemble small envelopes, had been examined during our earlier visit to the exhibition. The participants were each invited to make three artworks from a wide variety of paper and cardboard. These materials had been collected over the previous two weeks by the exhibition organiser and were added to by some paper that I brought with me.

Scissors, glue and tape were also provided, but in an unexpected improvisation, a furniture designer left the room to bring their own hand-tools from a nearby studio. This changed the way in which the designer fixed the materials together, so that they were sturdy sculptural works, and more like the models in furniture design. One aim of the workshop was to encourage participants to find new practical methods, and looking at the artworks in the exhibition beforehand was to stimulate this thinking. I had not anticipated what would happen if someone brought their own choice of tools. However, it expanded the scope of the workshop to have someone bring a different selection of equipment to work with, and it enhanced the observable outcomes.

The majority of our time was given to art-making, with time for discussion at the end of the workshop. A participant with architectural training presented three interrelated topographies, while a textile designer was interested in how marker pen ink stained through thin tissue paper, and used this method to make patterned drawings. Although individuals made some work according to their previous experience of making, they also adapted what they were making in some instances. One example of this was when a textile designer stood drawings up inside envelopes to resemble my folded envelope-shaped works. This suggested to me that participants were following the example of my artworks to some extent, but were also willing to invent and try new methods.

Participants devised new methods that had not been seen in the exhibition or described in my practice, with one person twisting and interweaving lengths of corrugated card. I observed that in some artworks, the labels found among the packaging materials were incorporated and formed the basis for new artworks. An artwork that incorporated

labels was displayed in the exhibition after the workshop. I observed that this new artwork had some parallels with Martin's use of found materials to make object-like constructions (see Chapter 3). The inclusion of printed designs and text suggested that participants were prepared to select materials differently from the artworks I had shown to them. Art-making in this setting led to improvisatory methods and new types of composition, which participants discussed both during and after the workshop.

### **Summary of responses**

- Variety in our different types of creative practice steered the dialogue, so that a number of different making and design outcomes were discussed and presented; for example, topologies, stage sets, printed patterning and furniture construction.
- One participant responded unexpectedly, introducing their tools to extend the possibilities of making.
- Participants were prepared to select materials differently from the artworks I had shown to them.
- Art-making in this setting led to improvisatory methods and new types of composition.

Facing page:

Fig. 111 One section of a larger cardboard artwork with printed text measuring around one metre in length, at the Edinburgh workshop in January 2014, Photograph: Sharon Phelps



**Workshop and Exhibition: Artbox charity at Fold Gallery, London, August 2015**

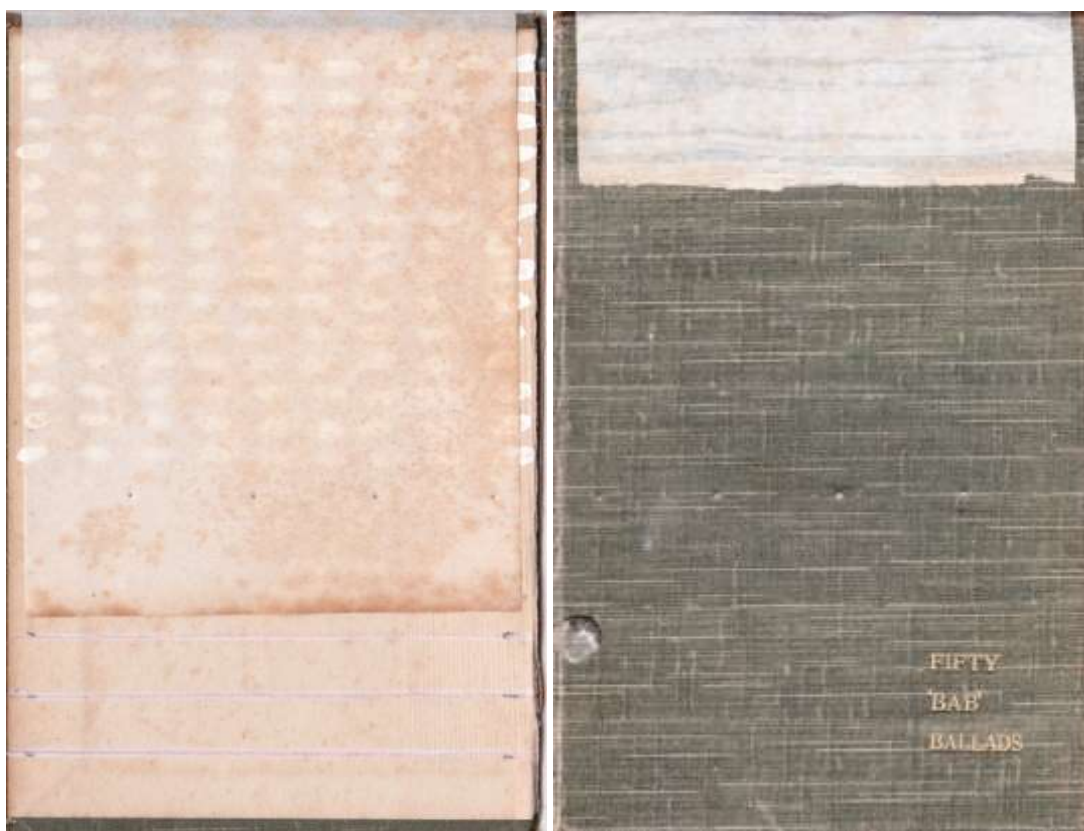
On 27 August 2015, I submitted a book cover work (Fig. 112) to an auction exhibition for the Artbox charity for artists with disabilities. Artworks were displayed either propped on narrow shelves or hung on the walls at Fold Gallery, London, and these included works by several gallery artists and others responding to an open call. My single work was propped on a supporting ledge alongside work by others. I also organised a workshop to take place in the exhibition with a group of eight participants.

In my artwork displayed at that exhibition, thin transparent paper with a discoloured edge has been taken from inside an old book and placed over dash-type marks made with white calligraphy ink applied with a thin pointed brush. The lower uncovered section has pale drawn pencil lines. Both the dashes and the ruled lines, with visible signs of marking out regular intervals, arose from my study of Martin's paintings (see Fig 48, *The Islands*, 1961, on page 85). There is a textured weave running down one side where the paper overlaid a mesh binding inside the cover, and this weave relates to some of Martin's artwork (see Chapter 2.2). A row of four dots along the bottom of the transparent paper are puncture holes through the paper and through the book cover beneath. The holes relate to the dots along the edge of Martin's painting *The Islands*, 1961, (fig 48), and to my experimentation with puncture holes that resemble staple holes (figs 83-84, page 149).

The second image shows the other side of the book cover, where there are glue streaks in the transparent paper along the top edge and an uneven edge where the paper was pulled from a book. This side shows the four puncture holes coming through from the front. The white mark on the lower left edge is a pre-existing mark on the cover. There are fine streaks in the dye on the green fabric cover. The gold embossed title remains as an element of marking in the surface, and this type of marking was discussed earlier (page 205) in my account of the presentation of practice at Chelsea College of Arts in November 2015.

Facing page:

Fig. 112 *Untitled* (2015) views of both sides of one artwork, Pencil and ink on paper and book cover, 13.5 x 9cm. Artwork and image by Sharon Phelps



The workshop took place with five artists accompanied by carers. We sat at tables set in one long line in the exhibition space. In order to create a contemplative and attentive setting, I read out a translation of an Eighth Century Chinese poem. I had selected this poem to reflect Martin's interest in Chinese painting and Taoism. The 'Taoist ideal' is to seek 'tranquil communion with Nature' among forests, streams, hills and mountains (Trevelyan, R.C. ed. *From the Chinese*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1945: xi). I also showed a catalogue of images of Agnes Martin's artworks at the Tate exhibition in 2015, and spoke about some of the methods she had used to make her paintings. I then presented some of my book cover pieces for people to hold and look at closely. The majority of the two-hour session was taken up by art-making, during which I also spent time speaking individually with each person to talk about and look at their art-making. At the end of the workshop, the charity organiser made a selection of works to be included in the exhibition.

Responses made through their artworks showed that in some instances participants had been prompted in their investigation to test different types of mark and composition by my explanation of Agnes Martin's methods. An artist who had a special interest in textiles described Martin's broken lines as stitches, and each artist made an individual interpretation of Martin's work through their own practice. Experimentation included reliefs, collages, sculptural work and painting. However, the carers, who said they were interested in the therapeutic benefits of art-making, tried to closely replicate Martin's grids by making drawings, and did not seem to experiment with new or unusual methods.

Rather than group discussion, insights were communicated to me during our one-to-one conversations. Since speech was limited for some, the responses were not always given verbally but through practice and these insights were sensitive to nuances in Martin's practice. One participant demonstrated the fragility I had described in Martin's artworks by balancing a small strip of thin paper on an arc of card. This was part of an artwork in which this artist also cut tiny fragments of paper and stuck them over a larger sheet of paper. These small pieces of paper were described as either being people or the weather, indicating their understanding that marks are open to different possibilities and meanings.

Some responses were prompted by the materials that I had provided, with one person cutting pieces of paper from a dressmaking template along the printed lines. The 'found' lines determined the curved shape of the new artworks. Another participant observed unfilled spaces in Martin's paintings, and this was the only person in the group who had previously seen Martin's artwork in a gallery, having been to Tate's recent 2015 retrospective. This artist painted marks around the edge of a sheet of paper, enclosing an unfilled interior space, and likened it to a garden. In this way they replicated what was for that person a contemplative space; the garden at their home which could be seen while painting in their studio. This group of people were innovative in their methods of making, and limited discussion was balanced by an imaginative use and placement of materials.



### Summary of responses

- Responses made through artworks showed that in some instances participants had been prompted in their investigation by my explanation of Agnes Martin's methods.
- An artist who had a special interest in textiles described Martin's broken lines as stitches.
- Each artist made an individual interpretation of Martin's work through their own practice.
- Experimentation by the artists in the group included reliefs, collages, sculptural work and painting.
- The carers, who said they were interested in the therapeutic benefits of art-making, did not seem to experiment with new or unusual methods.
- Insights were communicated during our one-to-one conversations.
- Responses were not always given verbally, but through practice, and these insights were sensitive to nuances in Martin's practice.
- One artist demonstrated through art-making an understanding that marks are open to different possibilities and meanings
- Some responses were prompted by the materials that I had provided, and pre-existing marks could determine the shape of the new artworks.
- An artist replicated through art-making what was for them a contemplative space, using their garden as an analogy, following their interpretation of the spaces observed at first hand in Martin's paintings.
- Artists were innovative in their methods of making, and limited discussion was balanced by an imaginative use and placement of materials.

**Workshop: Timothy Taylor Gallery, London May 2016**

To further clarify how practical knowledge of art-making methods may contribute to our understanding of artworks, I set up a group workshop on 5 May 2016 at the Timothy Taylor Gallery in London, bringing artworks that showed the development of my practice. Examples included collaged paper and packaging, which had been re-composed by pulling the pieces apart and re-positioning them. Participants were invited from an existing community of practice at UAL. We convened at the exhibition *Gabriel de la Mora: Serial* (18 March to 7 May 2016). Gabriel de la Mora is an artist who re-purposes discarded materials to make abstract paintings (see Chapter 8.2). My reason for situating the workshop alongside his work was to find how a respondent might engage with a new artist if prompted to think about the methods employed in their making. It was also to gain feedback about my method of presentation.

Five of the researchers were already known to me, and I selected them for inclusion in a ‘family’ of practice because in earlier discussions they either showed a particular interest in subtle and nuanced drawings and paintings, or had practical knowledge that enabled them to make what I deemed to be sensitive contributions. Two other practice-led researchers joined our workshop whom I had not previously met, but who were known to some other group members. My aim in filtering participants was to ensure an even dispersion of discussion amongst participants who would, I anticipated, based on my familiarity with most of them from previous discussions, allow space for each other’s comments and observations. Another artist-researcher was willing to participate, but could only attend for the last hour of our three-hour session. I decided not to include this person in the workshop as they would miss the introduction and first part of our discussion. They may then be out of step with the other participants, and even diffuse the later stage of our discussions and art-making.

After viewing Gabriel de la Mora’s paintings, we were introduced to the artist’s work by a curator at the gallery, Kat Sapera. This artist’s methods have a relation to my method of re-configuring arrangements of found paper and packaging, because he also selects materials that have been discarded, and arranges them into new artworks using remnants as the basis for new work. An unusual aspect of de la Mora’s practice is his highly complex and systematic procedure for organizing materials; a method of archiving into

categories according to size and type, which is instrumental in the generation of new artworks. Each fragment is classified according to colour and format, by degree of wear, brightness and opacity. The new works are then given their titles from his numbering on those archive categories. The curator gave a lively account of the bewildering complexity of his system, having learnt about the methods from the artist during two weeks of installation at the gallery.

She described his approach to making as meditative, and that he was still pursuing meditative-ness in his work. She explained that he is acutely aware of the attention given to hand-crafting in Mexican culture, and that methods of hand-making in his local region have an impact on his decision to make work by hand. I had not been aware of the curator talking about the 'meditative' nature of his methods, and later considered whether I had been resistant to the use of the term. My hesitancy was partly because I wanted to avoid confusion with therapeutic meditation for relaxation purposes. I was also concerned that it could be used to describe the calm appearance of Martin's work and her artwork's ability to give rise to feelings of tranquillity, but could conceal the practical nature of her methods. Martin had replaced a meditative practice arising from her study of Taoism with her painting practice.

A number of de la Mora's works are composed with residually marked fragments of metal printing plate and other remnants, being left-over from the off-set printing process in a nearby print workshop, which are cut to shape. My understanding is that the artist finds an item with an accidental occurrence and repeats that shape. There is a parallel systematization in the preparatory stages of Agnes Martin's practice. After a meditative period in which she is waiting for inspiration, an image of a painting comes into her mind which requires meticulous calculations in fractions of an inch. Large sheets of paper filled with calculations determine the accurate placement of hand-ruled lines and intervals which are marked on tape and placed on the paintings. Martin further systematizes her making process by repetition of marks. By contrast, de la Mora begins with a grid which becomes disrupted by the selection and placement of cut fragments from an archive of materials. He investigates the possibilities of painting by making collages of everyday and discarded materials.

Our workshop was situated in the smaller room at the rear of the large main gallery, and along one wall was an installation by the artist of a body of work made in series. It consisted of glass microscope slides partially inserted into the wall at different angles where light reflected up from them and cast shadows down. This arrangement was site-specific.

At the beginning of the workshop I explained how, in this case, my artworks were composed by rearranging pieces of paper and card so that small remnants can generate new works (see pages 121-122). These works were handed around, and the group were invited to examine them. During the discussion, I asked whether my methods could be re-traced by looking at my artworks, since making is left purposely exposed. One response was that it was possible to follow my methods, but that my reasons for selecting particular materials were not apparent - so that my artworks only partly reveal their making to the viewer. Art-making materials were laid out on tables so that members of the group could make their own new pieces. These included various types of paper and card that I had used in my works, and some materials with print, but also additional items such as clear plastic sleeves with rows of pockets and a pile of music sheets. Participants had been invited to bring their own found materials. Several objects were presented, and I was given an A4 sheet of red stickers, which could be seen as a ready-made composition (fig. 113). The last hour of the workshop was used for art-making.

We ran out of time to discuss these artworks, but examining works after the event, I discovered that one person had brought in a surprise element by adding blue tape salvaged from a different workshop to add to my materials. The addition of the blue tape was very different to my original selection of materials, which tend towards neutral brown and cream-white colours, and this vibrant colour was a welcome variant because it prompted me to think about the strong impact of a small area of colour within a quiet composition. Both the red strips and blue tape introduced an element into my materials that were uncharacteristic, but which could lead to further experimentation. The strongly coloured strips were discordant among the other elements that appeared tranquil by comparison. In my later artworks, red lines were painted on old paper (See

figs 49 and 51, pages 88-89), because I was replicating the use of red thread in Navajo weave.

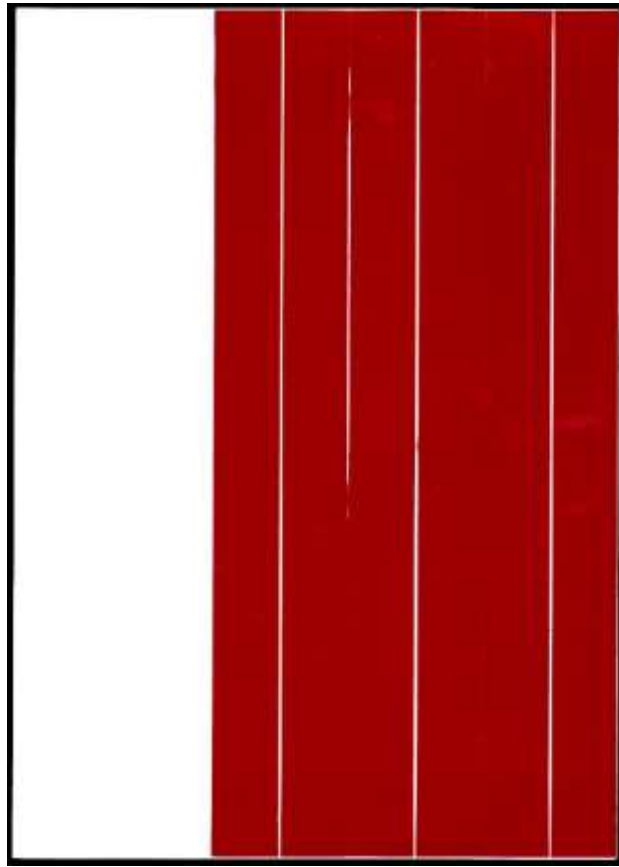


Fig. 113 A found composition of red strips at the Timothy Taylor workshop in May 2016

Discussion without making accounted for two thirds of the workshop, arising from points raised by the group. I had not allocated specific amounts of time in each workshop to different activities, as divisions seemed to occur spontaneously for each group. The percentage of time given to each activity has varied from almost all art-making to all dialogue, and with different combinations of both. Our group session opened a space for dialogue on a deeper issue; that we, as art practitioners, have a shared language and have more understanding of the artworks through dialogue than by making alone. A member of the group asked whether people without that shared language would be able to access very specific areas of artistic practice. There was lively debate about how inclusive or restrictive this may be, and whether we could accept that

certain types of very focused creative work may only be accessible to a few. However, it was generally accepted that although there may be superficial aspects of specialised practice which could be understood by anyone, a shared practice may yield deeper, or at least more specialist insights.

There was a now familiar degree of apprehension about possible damage to my works caused by touching, due to the fragile materials and construction. I had experienced some hesitancy in cutting old book covers to make some of these works, which may be similar to this anxiety. This feeling generated a discussion about care, trust and respectfulness towards artworks. I was not hesitant about offering my pieces to the group, knowing that my filtering process of selecting group members meant that invited participants had enough understanding of artworks to handle the works carefully. It was suggested that my artworks function as a 'mirror', so that when they are held by a respondent they reflect that person's reactions for me to see.

One participant, who was a researcher that I had not met before this workshop, expressed a lot of anxiety about touching my artworks, and was also reluctant to damage old music sheets, so folded them rather than cutting them. My request that they should hold the work seemed provocative, and to be an assertion of control. This seemed to be a different understanding of what I deemed to be guidance about looking at the work closely, and provoked further discussion about the participant's interpretation of my attitude. During discussion, I became aware that my request for attendees to pick up the artworks could be regarded as overly-assertive.

My intention was that handling the works would be an invitation to draw close to the surfaces, in the way that Martin's paintings invite close inspection of detail, but I am also aware that this offer can be interpreted differently, and that other types of presentation may sometimes be more appropriate. The person who felt anxiety about the fragile materials had also brought the blue tape, but had not announced its inclusion. After the event I told this participant that I found something 'playful' in those actions, and it was affirmed that this was an element of behaviour that they were trying to bring out. This appeared to be testing the limits of what might be 'allowed' within the workshop situation, and their playful disruption played a part. As a result, I am more aware that an

offer to a spectator to engage in active participation with an artwork may be interpreted in an unanticipated, even mischievous way by the invitees, and that I should not be too prescriptive about what I should expect as an outcome. In contrast, another respondent commented that it was interesting to see the working methods of a fellow practice-based artist researcher, and that this type of workshop presentation is a generous way to share insights about practice.

A discussion between participants in the workshop questioned whether Martin intended her surfaces to be 'subtle', or if variance of mark could be expected to arise as the result of her method of repetitive drawing. It was suggested within the group that Martin would expect variance to occur, and she would not necessarily describe or intend her marks to be called 'subtle'. The artist who raised this line of questioning had also brought along a recent drawing. Tiny, delicate repeated marks had been drawn in silver-point to create a square composition, so that the whole appeared to coalesce and to have uneven edges. This artist's viewpoint arising from experience of their own practice was that variance of mark may arise out of the method of hand drawing, without an intention to produce 'subtle' marks. In the exhibition in the main gallery, Gabriel de la Mora's ordered paintings could also lead us to look for subtle marks; small interruptions in his calm surfaces. The researcher who had brought a drawing expressed uncertainty about whether Agnes Martin worked carefully, as she appeared to paint quite quickly in a documentary film showing her at work on her paintings.

The event appeared to further strengthen the relationships within a 'family of practice' through dialogue. Responses given at this presentation informed me that spectators can experience very different types of reaction, and that although I intend the offer of viewing and making artworks as a form of sharing, this can also seem to be intimidating for some people. As a result, I have a greater awareness that challenges are part of mutual co-operation, and that researchers may offer disagreement.

### Summary of responses

- It is possible to follow my methods, but my artworks only partly reveal their making to the viewer.
- When invited to bring their own materials, I was given an A4 sheet of red stickers which could be seen as a found composition.
- A bright, contrasting material was added to my selection of mostly light or subtle-toned materials.
- Our group session opened a space for dialogue on a deeper issue; that we have a shared language for practice where we could each as art practitioners have more understanding of the artworks through dialogue than by making alone.
- It was generally accepted that there may be superficial aspects of specialised practice which could be understood by anyone, although it may not be possible to understand that practice on a deeper level.
- There was a degree of apprehension about possible damage to my works caused by touching, due to the fragile materials and construction.
- Apprehension about touching fragile works generated discussion about care, trust and respectfulness towards artworks.
- It was suggested that my artworks function as a 'mirror', so that when they are held by a respondent they reflect that person's reactions for me to see.
- A respondent commented that it was interesting to see the working methods of a fellow practice-based artist researcher, and that this type of workshop presentation is a generous way to share insights about practice.
- Participants in the workshop questioned whether Martin intended her surfaces to be 'subtle', or if variance of mark could be expected to arise as the result of her method of repetitive drawing.
- An artist brought along a recent drawing, and this showed their testing of subtle markings.
- A researcher expressed uncertainty about whether Agnes Martin worked carefully.



- Later feedback suggested that this workshop provided a space for insightful discussion about art practice, and an opportunity for me to keep my practice central within PhD research.
- The event appeared to further strengthen the relationships within a ‘family of practice’ through dialogue with practice.
- After discussion during a supervisory meeting about the term ‘meditative’, and giving further consideration during a discussion of artistic methods, I understood that it could be used to describe different forms of focused thought, including that of art practice. Although I have used the term ‘meditative’ earlier in my writing, it was only after this workshop, and then further discussion, that the term was applied.
- On later reflection after the workshop, my interpretation of whether Martin is ‘careful’ is that a degree of fluency in applying paint had been achieved in her later paintings, but that this still required care. An example to support this can be seen in a documentary film by Mary Lance (*Agnes Martin, with my back to the world* [DVD] 2003), where Martin stops talking and does not answer a question so that she can concentrate on applying thin washes of paint to the lower part of a canvas. Her earlier works, which were marked out in small intervals may have required a much higher degree of ‘careful’ attention. My thoughts on this issue now are that Martin was taking care in all her paintings when she transcribed from a small image in her mind onto a large canvas, and that a great deal of care had already gone into the preparatory stages before paint was applied.
- When I viewed Martin’s paintings at Dia: Beacon (Chapter 6.1), I described a crease across Martin’s untitled painting of 1959 (fig.65, page 115). In my practical experimentation, I discovered the importance of found marks within a composition. It is unlikely that Martin would have intended that ridge of paint in the surface of her painting, but through reflecting on my practice, and having looked at the work of Gabriel de la Mora, I discovered that an unintentional mark can be a significant part of a composition.

### **Further reflection on these presentations**

Presentations of my practice at seminars, symposia and conferences were crucial in guiding me in the development of my practice and they informed how I organised subsequent workshops. The wide range of responses elicited from all types of presentation informed the continuing development of my practical inquiry and a direct method of presentation of my resultant artworks. In one presentation, at Chelsea College, I became more aware of the physical environment in which my practice is situated. Importantly for my inquiry and the development of my workshop methodology, the artworks appear to be a means to activate conversation around art practice. It seemed to be a consensus amongst artists and researchers that making an artwork could assist the better comprehension of an artwork.

Workshops were organised so that there was a longer amount of time than at a seminar, conference or symposium to consider examples of practice at first hand, and to experiment with new methods. The small groups within a workshop setting provided an opportunity for extended discussion about practice; this would have been restricted by a structured schedule of presentations at a conference or symposium. This extended time within a small group provided space for contemplative thought and more varied dialogue around art practice. It also provided an arena for thought about how artists and researchers might vary in their responses to Martin's practice. A key finding was that participants could show practical understanding through action as well as through dialogue; for example, when an artist in the workshop at the Fold Gallery demonstrated the fragility in Martin's artworks by balancing a small strip of thin paper on an arc of card. That same artist also placed small fragments of paper on a larger sheet of paper to indicate how marks can be open to different possibilities and meanings (see page 224).

Some artists and researchers behaved unexpectedly; for example, introducing a different type of tool for making or bringing materials unannounced. Only one researcher brought their own artwork, but I discovered that their independent testing of one aspect of practice, subtle marks, provoked intense debate and provided further insights through discussion of their experience of making. There were several occasions during the

workshops where pre-existing marking or qualities intrinsic to the materials led to innovative methods. In a number of instances, artists and researchers drew on specialised practical knowledge from their own field, and this informed their interpretation of Martin's artwork.

One result of the workshops was that I became aware of researchers assessing my relationship with them. The presentations enabled me to refine how I present examples of practice, so that adequate guidance is given, particularly concerning the handling of artworks, but which also prompts participants to make their own separate investigations. In the final workshop, at Timothy Taylor gallery, the selection of a 'family' of participants enabled a degree of specialised language about practice. In that workshop the contribution that discussion can make around art practice was highlighted, and subsequent art-making allowed for a further degree of testing.

Some responses showed that the artworks communicated attentive experience. These included physical responses like the surprise at opening flaps or perceiving slight movement, taking care when handling materials, peering between layers in artworks, and expressing an experience of the materials; for example, gathering together the 'niceness' of old paper (see page 206). On one occasion when my artworks were offered to a textile researcher, a connection was mentioned between my 'veil-like' artworks and Lenore Tawney's contemplative artworks (page 214). The presentations raised the issue of how artists and researchers can find a language that adequately talks about art practice. Words can only partially explain artworks, whereas making can be used to differently interpret and extend our understanding of them.

## **Chapter 12: A workshop methodology**

A study of Agnes Martin through my practice has led me to devise a workshop methodology (with steps listed below) that others can follow to carry out their own research. The criteria that I have developed are not exclusive or absolute. They have been tested in live situations where there are a number of unpredictable variables, but nevertheless offered insights which would seem to be extendable to future situations. This methodology is offered as a guide to assist artists and researchers in contemporary art practice who wish to make an in-depth practical study of an artist and their methods. A simplified single-page list of the steps is also included in the appendices (Appendix E). This methodology is submitted as a contribution to knowledge, thereby extending an existing body of artistic research which foregrounds the role of practice and related discussion (see Chapter 13).

A researcher who wishes to find new practical understanding by examining artworks at first-hand could also find this methodology helpful as a means for sharing practical knowledge with others in their field. The researcher must first consider whether they are willing to allow others to engage in a very direct way with their artwork, thereby inviting dialogue within a group of invited participants who have a shared interest in that field, and be willing to test methods in a group situation through new art-making (see Chapter 11.2). Through testing in a workshop situation and by inviting responses, this methodology has been further refined so that it has evolved into a form that is repeatable by other art researchers if they wish to make their own studies of an artist. It is transferable through events where practice is discussed, and these include seminars, conferences, symposia and workshops.

**1. The researcher must first define the focus of their study**

My proposal that a researcher must first take time to find a focus may seem to be an obvious first step. However, it is worth stating that without this deliberation I initially followed unnecessary pathways. The researcher must carefully consider the purpose of their study, clearly stating the aims for their research. This careful framing avoids wasting time on a scattered approach, and I discovered that it was helpful to have three guiding sentences, and to refer to these throughout my research. The guiding sentences that I used were:

1. To communicate through workshops, the contemplative experience offered by Martin's paintings.
2. I have attended through my practice to her careful methods, enabling me to make similarly quiet artworks in a present-day context.
3. This is important and relevant now as we (The slow movement) challenge the 'go, go, go' problem.

In my research, I sought to identify particular qualities in Martin's work, and to discover how contemplative experience is communicated to the viewer. I investigated how Martin's methods relate to contemporary practice at the limits of painting and its extension into sculpture. I chose to examine a transitional moment in Martin's practice; the late 1950s when she made constructions of found materials, so that I could better understand later developments in her practice. In doing this, I wanted to discover new art-making methods which could be shared with other artists and used in a present-day context.

It can be tempting to follow interesting lines of thought in an intuitive way. One possible advantage of doing this would be to respond to what these speculative inquiries throw up. When I have done this, the guide sentences provided a means to edit such information, and to sort out its relevance to my study. This sifting, where some information must be discarded (or stored for another project) allowed me to prioritise the most relevant findings, and to relate them to my research question. My gradual

realization was that finding the focus for a study is not only something that happens prior to the research, but is also an ongoing process of sorting and editing.

## **2. Artworks must be examined in detail at first hand**

Close inspection of artworks enables a researcher to give attention to the materials and methods used. I proceeded by visiting exhibitions and collections of Martin's work at Tate, London, at Dia:Beacon near New York and at the Harwood Museum in Taos, New Mexico. My own extended time with Martin's work led me to observe details that would have been unavailable in images and to make connections between different categories of work (see Chapters 4.3 and 6). I made repeated visits, and these were either alone, or with other artists when conversations about particular paintings occurred. By means of repeated viewing, I discovered relationships between different artworks, to follow the developments in Martin's practice, and to gain a deeper insight into her methods. My practical analysis of Martin's artwork is ongoing, and not limited only to the methods discovered so far.

When I examined Martin's artworks, I drew simple diagrams and made notes to remember details. Additionally, I took some photographs to record what I had seen. Martin's paintings are difficult to represent in photographs, as texture and delicate marks are lost. Later, if those records were lacking certain information, I had to supplement my notes and photographs by checking images in catalogues or on gallery websites for confirmation. Reproductions can prevent the researcher from examining possible perceptual effects of an artwork. This was particularly important in my study; for example, when my perception of Martin's paintings varied according to changes in light (see page 138) and when an extended viewing distance caused the finely detailed surfaces to 'dissolve' (page 100-101)

I particularly wanted to see Martin's constructions at first-hand, as they are crucial in understanding the developments in her practice, and interpreting that practice in relation to contemporary work that may be seen to extend the limits of painting. This initially proved difficult because they are usually held outside the United Kingdom, sometimes in private collections. I also wanted to examine both sides of the work, as this

further reveals how they are made and gives a clearer indication of their actual depth and all-over surfaces. Opportunities to do this were limited, because the artworks are fragile, and of high monetary and insurance value. A major exhibition at Tate Modern, London, in 2015, enabled me to see a wide range of Martin's artworks and to look more closely at the constructions, but, frustratingly, provided only a small degree of access to view both sides. As there were restrictions on touching the work, I relied on a curator to provide access to the reverse side of an artwork as it was being installed.

### **3. A practical analysis is made by re-enacting elements observed in the earlier artworks**

The researcher can experiment in their own practice to make new work by first identifying separate elements in the subject of their study. In one instance, my observation was that Martin's painting *The Islands* (1961) (Fig. 48, page 85) resembled weave, and had dots along the edges of the canvas that looked like holes. This led me to inquire about weave in relation to Martin's practice (see Chapter 2.2 and 4.2). I then made new artworks with weave-like marks, and incorporated puncture holes and rows of pencil dots together. Careful consideration was given to my choice of materials, but they did not need to be identical to the originals. For example, Martin found wood, wire and bottle caps to make constructions, but I experimented with packaging and old books.

My re-enactment of her methods enabled me to study developments in her practice. When I made visits to investigate Martin's artwork at first-hand, I was open to surprising discoveries and recorded what I observed. However, this was further enhanced by discussions in the gallery when others drew attention to aspects of the work that I had not been aware of, and this also allowed me to test my ideas and exchange knowledge about Martin.

My recommendation for other researchers would be to conduct a literature review in parallel with their practical study. In a contextual review, conducted alongside my practical study, I compared Martin with other artists, both in her artistic community (see Chapter 3) and with some South American artists; Lygia Clark and Gego (see Chapter 10). I also visited collections, including museums of Native American art, and made trips

to the locations where Martin made her artworks. This research fed into my practice, and led me towards new perspectives on Martin's practice. I studied some contemporary artists who are testing possibilities for painting now; experimenting with different materials and new methods. This recent practice contributed further to my understanding of how work at the limits of painting is evolving at the present time. One example described in this thesis is Jane Bustin (see Chapter 8.1). This range of study prompted new thinking in my practice about specific qualities, methods, materials and mark-making.

#### **4. Workshops: the presentation of artworks**

By encouraging other people to scrutinize artworks at first-hand in a workshop setting, there is the opportunity for them to closely examine and report on elements of mark, surface and materials. This direct presentation is necessary to disseminate practical knowledge, and these responses can inform the ongoing development of practice. In my research, workshops have shown to be effective in opening a space for debate about art practice and to share knowledge through practice (see Chapter 11.2). I organised three workshops, where examples of my new artworks were offered to invited participants with an accompanying explanation about the focus of my study. I described to them how I had re-enacted the methods of another artist through my practice. When my artworks were offered to people to be picked up and handled, this enabled them to inspect and respond to the different elements that they observed. Participants in the workshops can also test ideas in a practical way through art-making. In my workshops, they did this either with materials that I supplied or with some of their own materials if they wished to bring them.

My study of two artists, Lygia Clark and Gego (see Chapter 10), who found ways to invite spectator participation, informed my decisions about how invited participants in a workshop setting might engage more actively with my work. In my re-enactment of Martin's practice, I produced new artworks where the tactility of the materials and separate layers, with flaps or semi-transparent paper, are intended to encourage people to handle the work. This was problematic for some people, who were anxious about



handling the work because it is fragile, and they found my invitation to handle artworks too authoritative. Each workshop, lasting around three hours, was set up alongside an exhibition, so that participants could also carefully inspect the displayed artworks and engage in dialogue about any art-making methods they discovered in those works.

Artists and art researchers attending my workshops were encouraged to test the methods that I presented and those they had seen in the exhibition by making new work during the session. I brought a selection of materials, but participants were also invited to add their own materials.

At earlier presentations, I found some people could disrupt the contemplative mood I was trying to establish, and that this closed down quieter conversations. My concern that overly assertive voices could exclude other valuable contributions led me to try to find a balance where everyone in the group could be heard. This can be problematic, because by achieving quieter conversations, I could also be editing out other deeply felt critical responses. I refined my choice of participants by selecting and inviting a 'family' of practice, who were small groups of people with a shared interest in the work being presented. Those people, with a few exceptions, had attended earlier seminars, exhibited their artworks with me or had already been involved in conversations with me about practice, and this led to their inclusion in future discussions. A filtering process also enabled more focused dialogue about particular aspects of practice and an exchange of ideas.

Responses given in these workshops were carefully collated and reviewed. It is also helpful for the researcher to note when their expectations are not met; for example, at my presentation at Chelsea College of Arts in November 2015, my expectation was that the fragility of the artworks might make people reluctant to pick them up. However, this was not the case. While I did not make sound or video recordings of my presentations and workshops, some other researchers may, if they wish, reach an agreement with participants that allows recordings to take place (see also the introduction to Chapter 11). In instances when a researcher intends to make recordings, consideration should be given to possible ethical implications, which are not limited to,

but may include, obtaining consent from participants, identification of individuals and the future storage and use of the recordings.

The responses and other related occurrences at presentations enabled me to further refine the workshop methodology as a guide for others who wish to make their own practical study. This dialogue with other artists and researchers in a workshop setting brought into focus certain aspects of my study that merited further consideration. One example of this was when a researcher at the Timothy Taylor Gallery workshop in London, in May 2016 (page 232) asked a question about subtle marking in relation to Martin's practice. This provoked an intense exchange of dialogue, not only about subtle marks, but more generally about the accessibility of artistic language to discuss practice.

### **Summary of the workshop methodology and its role in artistic research**

This chapter described a methodology in which elements of artworks identified through first-hand observation and earlier methods are examined through practice. The resulting new artworks are in a provisional state, offering the possibility for further reflection.

Participatory workshops described in this study are unlike those that demonstrate technique, but instead are intended to generate fresh perspectives through art-making and discussion. New work made in these workshops is part of an investigatory process, where the aim is for makers to think through and around practice. The workshop methodology therefore offers an alternative type of presentation to exhibition display. It foregrounds the role of practice and related discussion within art research, contributing further to a body of PhD practice-led research, where art researchers are seeking ways to confirm the centrality of practice.

Key elements of this methodology can be summarised as:

- A framework in which to carefully examine art-making methods and materials.
- The re-enactment of earlier artworks and methods through new practice in order to understand them more fully and to gain fresh insights.
- An investigation of earlier methods to find their relevance in a present-day context.
- An emphasis on *closeness*; a direct engagement with artworks, both through first-hand viewing of earlier work and in offering new work for other artists and researchers to handle.
- Participatory workshops as a space in which to produce and share new practical knowledge, and as a means to inform ongoing practice.
- The ability of practice-led research to engage with and respond to art historical research and writing.

### **Chapter 13: Conclusion and contributions to knowledge**

This thesis' primary contribution to knowledge is a new workshop methodology, outlined in detail in Chapter 12, to augment how we can practically research an artist and their methods. I provided a working example of this by applying it to Agnes Martin, and investigated how the field of painting extended into sculpture. Secondly, by applying the practice and workshop methodology, a further contribution to knowledge is made which adds to existing studies of Agnes Martin's practice and by considering her practice in relation to her contemporaries in South America (see Chapter 10). Mondrian's influence can thereby be traced in two separate but parallel lines of abstraction. Understanding of Martin's methods and local North American influences have also been extended, and some of these findings are evidenced in new practice which have been described in detail in the notes on my practice at the end of each chapter. Thirdly, this new practice relates for the first-time Martin's approach to her work with those of artists working today; an example given in this thesis is Jane Bustin (see Chapter 8.1).

#### **The workshop methodology**

Crucial to the development of a new methodology has been the proposition that by engaging in art practice, a new understanding of existing artists' practice may be achieved (see Chapter 1.2). The workshop methodology is distinguished by its emphasis on participatory practice around art-making; it offers a discursive frame by which active engagement is encouraged within carefully selected groups of artists and art researchers, a 'family' of practice. This close involvement in workshops within an exhibition setting is shown to contribute to the decision-making around ongoing practice, and prompt further reflection on art practice more generally.

This study highlighted the significance of care and attentiveness in Martin's practice (see Chapter 2), and I described how these were enacted in my practice through selection of

materials, placement and careful mark-making (see Chapter 7, selection and sorting materials). The fragile works that I have produced are offered for others to examine closely by picking them up and handling them. Presentation of these nuanced artworks invites responses through a direct engagement with the viewer, and discussions with artists and researchers around these artworks showed the ability of practice to reveal new practical knowledge. Findings in this study suggest that art-making can address instances where spoken language fails to adequately convey practical knowledge, and that close engagement between viewer and artwork can act as a catalyst for dialogue and further experimentation.

I contribute this new methodology, described in Chapter 12, as a guide for other art researchers who wish to study an artist. The workshop model offers art researchers an opportunity to touch surfaces, carefully inspect marks and test arrangements of different types of materials. Workshops have been found to provide a space in which to offer sensorial experience beyond that of only the visual, and to convey tacit knowledge. They also provide a social space in which to discuss and share artistic knowledge with others who have a mutual interest in making. This practice-led methodology has been shown to produce fresh insights about an earlier artist and their methods, contributing new knowledge within contemporary art practice and complementing art historical research.

### **The possibilities for painting**

This research offers a new practical understanding of Martin's methods, elucidating how the objects that she made as part of her painting practice (see Chapter 3) have a relation to contemporary art practice which may extend the possibilities for painting. Martin's object-like constructions of found materials in the late 1950s were investigated within the development of her painting practice (see Chapters 3 and 5). From the late 1950s into the grid paintings of the 1960s, Martin codified her perception of landscape as a series of marks and lines (Chapter 5). While not a direct form of recording, Martin's art-making has the capacity to evoke nature or a landscape environment through a system of

marking or inscribed line. In the introduction to this thesis, I described making repeated marks in my oil paintings, which recalled intervals set out within the landscape near my studio. Like the clay tablets made by contemporary artist Anna-Bella Papp (page 167), Martin's inscriptions of surface may be interpreted as sublimations of her surroundings; the landscape and built environment

I considered two different types of landscape: the buildings and neighbourhood of the seaport area at Coenties Slip (Chapter 3), and the mountains and plains of New Mexico (Chapter 4). Investigations of those regions prompted further inquiry into local craft or traditional making practices, in which traditional Navajo weave was also found to be an interpretation of the natural world (see Chapter 4.2). Martin's extended inquiry into arrangements of line and grid composition was traced through practical aspects of making and through contemplative methods. Building with adobe was discussed as a parallel activity to Martin's art-making, and I explained how this traditional form of making is passed on through a community (see Chapter 4.1). Craft practice provided some insights about making lines (see page 106), and Martin's hand-drawn application of line was further examined in my practice when I made artworks by selecting incised line (page 102). Martin, and many of the other artists considered in this thesis, extend painting into object-like artworks, but which also cannot be clearly defined as sculpture.

#### **A wider context in which to view Martin's art**

When I re-enacted Martin's practice, I discovered the importance of careful selection of materials, and experienced a concentrated state of awareness through giving focus to making marks (see page 171). By mirroring the evidence of making I had observed in Martin's paintings, I made provisional compositions where construction was emphasised (see pages 121 - 122). My experimentation also produced delicate and fragile line. I did this by mirroring Martin's use of found materials (see Chapter 3), and then by making a selection of pre-existent markings or by experimenting differently to discover other ways to produce line in my artworks, for example by isolating a found mark (page 133).

I also described that Venezuelan artist Gego was – like Martin - conducting an intense investigation of fragile line, and produced similarly delicate weave-like artworks (see Chapter 10).

That part of my investigation further widened the context in which Martin's compositions can be interpreted, proposing a different reading of her art practice in the context of some types of abstraction in South America (Chapter 10). By acknowledging the shared influence of Mondrian, I have drawn parallels between Martin and South American artists, for example Lygia Clark, who were making individual interpretations of geometric abstraction. In Chapter 10, I wrote that for some artists, like Clark, this resulted in objects that could not be explicitly categorised as painting or sculpture. That part of my research focused on the response of the viewer, and demands for close proximity or active engagement with an artwork. This was significant in informing my decision-making about the presentation of my artworks and then, consequently, the development of a workshop methodology, which other art researchers are now invited to test (see Chapter 12).

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## APPENDIX A

### **Preliminary Research:**

#### **Research Bureau Journal: Daniel Wallis – making (November 2011)**

One requirement for MRes (Arts Practice) was a written component titled the ‘Research Bureau Journal’. This writing was not in a dissertation format, but was written as journal notes. It articulated decisions leading to a proposal for conducting this PhD research, and contributed to the formulation of a research question. The journal explained my decision to focus on a particular aspect of Agnes Martin’s practice, that of ‘making’. My study of Daniel Wallis confirmed to me that a contemporary artist can bring fresh insights to discussions of Martin’s practice. The journal entry is reproduced below:

**Excerpt taken from Master of Research (Arts Practice) in 2011-12 (statements were read and authorised by Daniel Wallis for inclusion in this research).**

At the outset of the course (in October 2011) I began by focusing my research on ideas of space, and the type of space within Agnes Martin’s paintings. My initial emphasis was on ideas of poetic space, influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s book ‘The Poetics of Space’ (1958). However, I realised that the spaces being discussed were interior spaces, containers of memory. This did not fit with Agnes Martin’s work. In early November I saw the exhibition ‘Fragile Construct’ by artist Dan Wallis at the Simon Oldfield Gallery, in London. I met this artist to discuss his installation, which seemed to me like walking into a three dimensional Agnes Martin painting.

The following is my descriptive account of being in the installation, the gallery statement and images of the installation. On the 9 November 2011 I met Dan Wallis, initially with thoughts of discussing the installation as a poetic space. However, the process of making seemed really important to him and this came across in our conversation.



**Installation as Poetic Space: A descriptive account of being in the space**

*Fragile Construct* (2011), an installation by Daniel Wallis is (in the words of his gallery statement) “Inspired by the poetic consequence of a space intervened...”

Lines and small, intricate objects are suspended in and across the space. Although there is no actual movement, there is a suggestion of imperceptible movement or movement paused for a brief moment; pendulums, rotation and suspension.

The lines cut through the gallery space like overhead power lines, and there are red triangles that bring to mind warning triangles. But this does not feel like being in a city space, an urban environment with noise and pollution. This is a quiet space and there is a sense of being outdoors – perhaps in fields where lines track for miles across the landscape.

Similar to the type of drawing you can do without taking your pen off the paper, *Drape* (2011) hangs in a separate room of the gallery looping from the ceiling. Slim lengths of wood are attached to each other by hinged joints. Tracing it from starting point to end is like following a puzzle as it turns back on itself and then moves forward again. The end is punctuated with a blue ball, a full stop. The line seems infinite, but there is a beginning and an end.

There is a sense of things being in balance, or actually balancing. The small objects are intricately crafted, often in wood, and demand close inspection. The scale ranges from room height and width to something small enough to fit into your hand. Although existing in actual space, the installation functions like a painting that has perceptual space – a kind of 3D Agnes Martin painting.

When questioned, the gallerist (who himself had an interest in Agnes Martin) referred to Daniel Wallis’ interest in Gaston Bachelard’s ‘The Poetics of Space’ and it is possible to see his interest through viewing the work.

**Gallery statement for the exhibition *Fragile Construct*, 6 October – 9 November 2011**

**Daniel Wallis at Simon Oldfield Gallery, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London**

“Inspired by the poetic consequence of a space intervened, Wallis’ new body of work exhibits both power and poise. Dissecting the gallery to create an ‘active void’ using colour and form, Wallis suspends wooden lengths spanning and tumbling across the height and width of the gallery. Intricate and smaller sculptures jostle alongside larger works reflecting his diverse investigations. Incorporating wood, plastic, paint and metal, Wallis takes basic elements and transforms them into constructions which question the tension between hidden strength and perceived fragility.”



Daniel Wallis, *Flux*, installation at Simon Oldfield Gallery, Two views in 2011, wood, fabric and metal. Images: Simon Oldfield Gallery, London

**Summary of conversation with Daniel Wallis about his installation *Fragile Construct* on 9 November 2011**

There are a mix of influences in Dan Wallis' practice which include *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, Russian Constructivism and riffs (or music sampling).

His modular systems begin life with a degree of flexibility, in that the components are crafted as individual parts while decisions are being made as to how they may come together to form a whole structure. Intentions may change during this process, for example a piece that began life as a mobile later became part of a static piece. However, this is not to suggest that the process is fully intuitive. For pieces such as *Drape*, careful designs are made using Google sketch-up (a CAD programme) and sketchbooks. Whilst there is a choice of elements to use, the space dictates the outcome.

It is the artist's intention that there should be an 'active void', where the sculpture almost brushes the visitor's shoulder, providing an element of interaction on entering the installation space. Some fixtures that are part of the space dictate the placement of the work. A sculptural piece such as *Drape* does have a degree of fluidity and can be manipulated to fill a room.

*Flux* was developed specifically for this gallery space and could not exist elsewhere in exactly the same form, although it has been shown as a smaller version in the Viewing Space at Bloomsbury Square. The artist feels that this installation manipulates how the viewer goes into it; there is another layer that floats above the viewer. It instils a sense of there being a resonance or vibration, which is common in many of the pieces. In much of the work there is a feeling of movement paused, tipping points and objects about to drop or rotate.

Wallis enjoys a variety of processes in order to create work, in addition to which he uses drawings and maquettes. The use of drawing in the artist's practice becomes apparent in the mapping pieces (*Map* 2011), where a router is used together with black lines. This linear aspect in the work is an important part of Wallis' language together with careful consideration of how spaces go together.

Background music affects the tempo of the making. There is a play and lightness experienced by the artist in the making of things contrasted with a great degree of consideration necessary in some of the processes of making and decisions being made, such as reaching a stopping point. For the artist, the work can only be complete when it is installed in the space, where elements within the work play off against each other.

**MRes (Arts Practice) thesis** (submitted August 2012)

**Title - The paintings of Agnes Martin and Callum Innes: a comparative study exploring nuance produced by their working methods and the encounter with such work**

A summarised form of the MRes thesis follows here:

In my MRes thesis, I compared methods, materials and use of colour, contrasting Martin with contemporary painter Callum Innes. Nuance was further explored in my practice to find new art-making methods. My focus on 'making' arose from my study of Daniel Wallis, and was also informed by some existing research on Martin, which included that of Zoe Leonard, a photographer. When writing about Martin, Leonard asked if there is 'a way of thinking that only happens in the doing of the task'. She suggested that certain questions arise when an artist looks at a painting; 'How did the artist do that? How is it made?' (Leonard, in Cooke ed. 2011:91).

The role of the spectator was examined in a text by Kasha Linville (Artforum magazine, June 1971: 72-3). Linville's phenomenological account became a model for other writers about Martin's practice, and was endorsed by Rosalind Krauss in her essay *The /Cloud/* (in Haskell ed. 1992:158). Linville described different perceptions of Martin's paintings which depend upon the viewer's position. Her careful reading described looking at Martin's paintings close-up to see nuances of mark, and she pointed out how the surface becomes an atmosphere or haze, eventually becoming opaque, as the spectator moves further away. I tested that viewing experience and described looking at Martin's paintings from different distances. I indicated that separating materiality and phenomenal effects in Martin's paintings was subject to research by Kathryn A. Tuma, who proposed that luminosity (reflectivity of light) in Martin's paintings first occurs at the level of materials (*Enhancing Stillness: The Art of Agnes Martin* (de Zegher and Teicher eds. 2005:41).

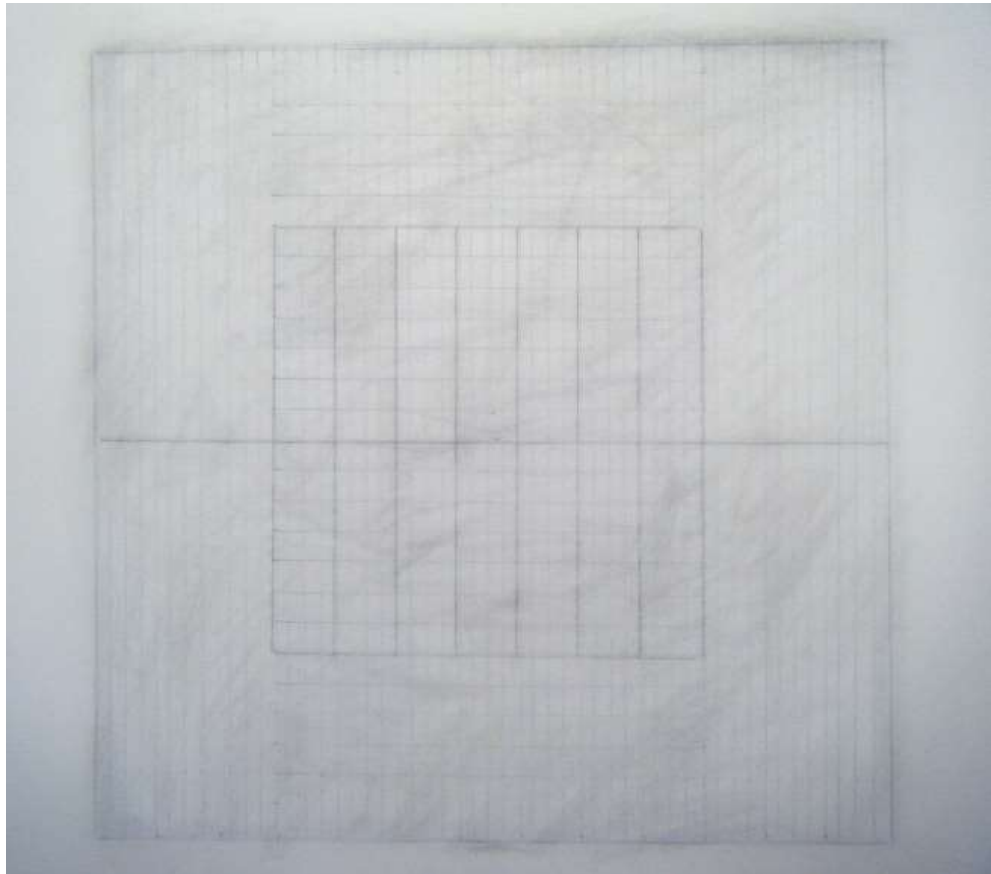
Martin's use of colour, form and weight are introduced through allusion to rhythms in Bridget Riley's paintings. Callum Innes' methods are described after viewing his paintings and speaking with the artist at his studio. Supplementary information was also accessed from a sound recording made for the 'Artist's Lives' series (National Sound Archive, British Library, 2004). The remainder of the thesis is given to a comparison

between Innes and Martin. By contrasting their practices, I was able to draw up a list of Martin's art-making methods and the qualities I had observed in her paintings:

- An organised method of making that provides a structure that is repeatable in many variations.
- Sensitivity to materials: nuance occurs through materials
- Complex methods of making that produce paintings that look simple
- Compositions that have delicate line or edge with restricted colour
- Repetition and regular or rhythmic spacing or intervals
- Qualities should include fragility, transparency and luminosity
- Evidence of making remains in the finished paintings

Martin's paintings were briefly compared to those of Ad Reinhardt before a context was established in which Martin is described as making art work in an active sense, elucidated through her interest in Chinese paintings. When I studied examples at the British Museum, I became acutely aware of joins between panels in Chinese silk wall hangings. I produced a series of new paintings and drawings using the qualities I had observed in Martin's paintings, but utilising a set of new methods to make lines, and these new methods were different to those of Martin:

- **Folding**, to create edges as lines and to create fragmented planes.
- **Erasure** of graphite drawn lines to create fragile and delicate line, either rubbing out pencil to leave a light trace, or applying a layer of oil paint so that the graphite partially dissolved.
- **Scoring** with a sharp point, so that watercolour paint seeped into the scored lines or revealed white lines on dry paintings where the paper showed. Some scored lines cut through the paper, so that light came through.



Sharon Phelps, An 'erased' grid drawing (2012) graphite on Ingres paper. 48 x 65cm. Photograph Robert Phelps

Callum Innes suggested that some types of line I had described from my new methods resemble the Anhua (hidden decoration) technique used in Chinese porcelain (originating in the Song dynasty, 960 – 1279). This is uncoloured decoration under a clear glaze, which can be seen when the surface is tilted to reflect light. Designs are made by incising or impressing the line into the porcelain before glazing and firing. I examined examples of that design at the British Museum. I also re-enacted Martin's method to produce layered line, where paint is applied over a line drawing, and a second composition of line is drawn on the top surface after the paint has dried.

A conclusion was reached by showing examples of my practice to others in MRes seminars, which led to discussion about whether Martin's irregularities of mark, line and painted surface were deliberate. The conclusion of the MRes thesis was that Martin chose to use methods that created nuance. I created nuance in my practice in the following ways:

## Appendices

- Changes in softness or hardness of pencil
- Irregular erasure of line
- Distortion or bleed of line/edge
- Drawing or scoring over lines creating a mismatch or shadowing
- Inaccuracy of calculations and measurements leading to differences
- Grids needing to flow over at one edge to accommodate rhythms of colour
- Folding or scoring to create lines
- Uneven dissolution of paint or watercolour pencils
- Transparency of paint and luminosity
- Hidden image (for example, erased marks and lines)

I concluded that Martin's methods could be developed in new ways for artists who are interested in subtle differences in the surface of paintings, and that this could be achieved by using structured and repeatable working methods. A selection of my new artworks were exhibited at Chelsea College of Arts, London together with the written thesis which proposed that Martin's methods are a rich resource that artists working now can draw from and re-invent.

## APPENDIX B

**Yantras:** This information is a brief summary of yantra symbols, their ritualistic preparation and use, taken from a complex interpretation by Professor S.K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Yantras* (1988).

The meaning of the term 'yantra' originated from 'appliance' or 'instrument'. Yantras are diagrams made by priests or shamans accompanied by prescribed rituals, and intended to give protection to people, their households and animals. Surfaces for their inscription have varied; a rocky surface for community designs; personal and private designs on paper; metal in a household or amulets which are worn by individuals. Metals include gold, silver and copper, inscribed using a pointed gold rod. Inscriptions are also made on stone slabs, palm leaf, birch bark and paper. When placed in a household, yantras are worshipped by members of a family.

There are prescribed methods for drawing, which is done with a mixture of red and yellow pigments. When the yantra is drawn it is covered with yellow cloth and tied with silken threads until consecration. Yantras worn on the body are not consecrated and are worn on specific parts of the body. Consecration rites are reduced if the person preparing the yantra has certain pure and tranquil qualities. After consecration, the yantra becomes a divinity and is then fit for worship.

Spaces within the inscribed forms may contain inscriptions, which can be a mantra that increases the power of the yantra, and is associated with the Spirit. The name or initial of a person can also be inscribed, to give 'protection' to that person. Symbols such as arrow-heads or spears denote 'energy vectors'. It is usual for circles to be transformed into an open lotus, with each petal containing energy. The lotus symbolises purity, freedom from interference of the outside, the multidimensional, and the creative process. It also signifies Spirit; the 'emanation of the influence, reaching out'. A square is the equivalent of four tridents or other defensive weapons used by the Spirit, signifying protection. A triangle represents energy lines which are 'the aspects or the attendants of the spirit' (Delhi, 1988:10-13 and 29-35).



## APPENDIX C

**Exhibition notes:** *The Astonishing* by Jane Bustin and *Where are you?* by Lina Lapelyte (a sound work) at Austin Forum, Hammersmith, 27 June – 11 July 2014.

The exhibition contains sixteen small works with different surfaces and materials.

Bustin sets up contrasts between paired works or divided panels and surfaces. She contrasts opacity - transparency, pale colour - neutral/ self-coloured, polished copper - matte surface, smooth - stained, opaque paint - diluted paint, straight lines - irregular edges.

There is almost no incident in surfaces, so that the viewer is drawn to slight changes of line and tone. The paintings have a calm appearance (not active). Colour shifts are subtle; for example, a pale coffee-coloured painted canvas was placed adjacent to a rectangle of coppery-brown loosely woven fabric.

Areas of smoothly painted surface can either be adjacent to or within compositions. The artist has used bare fine linen or wood panels. The work is tactile in appearance because of the differently textured surfaces.

Paired works often vary in size and depth, although they can be the same.

There are stained areas or bleeding edges, especially on the most recent works. I observed delicacy of line and edge. The edges are part of the work, and can be defined by colour. A coloured edge can also mark the separation from an adjoining panel. Some edges of fabric or paper can be frayed or torn. Bustin often uses small areas of neon coloured highlights on the inner or outer edges or all along the upper edge, but sides can also be painted with a light colour.

The artist sometimes places a fine transparent fabric stretched over a wood frame adjacent to a painting. Geometric division can be organised by setting rectangular forms within rectangles.

The artist juxtaposes different materials, for example: latex, transparent paper, paint, wood panel, found paper, copper. One panel comprises pale pink latex draped from or held by a single pin.

I observed the use of fine delicate lines, subtle shifts of colour and surface, and symmetry or mirroring.

**Notes from a conversation on 9 July 2014 with Jane Bustin at her exhibition:**

The artist explained that she takes colours from frescoes and modernist buildings, and that these tend to be pale colours, including pink and turquoise. She looked at a fresco by Masaccio for this show. Her thinking is done in advance about colours and ideas.

Paint is layered and sanded. There is an initial layer of thick gesso, followed by up to ten applications of paint over a long time period, with sanding between each layer.

She initially found it frustrating to match panels, sometimes finding that the size or depth was different. The artist now works with that, and deliberately tries to emphasise difference.

In recent work, she has been using paper from old hymn books, which are glued onto the wood panels. Tracing paper is laid over and they are ironed, and then the tracing paper is removed.

Her recent paintings are more playful, and she is trusting herself to allow things to happen and try things. This is as a result of having more time at the studio during the day. (My note: the recent work is more delicate).

She has been making Japanese tea bowls, and noticing their irregularities. She has shown bowls with one painting, but these ceramics are in an early stage of experimentation (My note: the sensibility in making the bowls relates to the careful consideration in making paintings).

Other practices feed into her painting, for example, printing which informs line and edge where ink gathers along edges.

She practices ballet, and explained to me that the figure describes shapes in three dimensions. The shapes in the paintings have some relation. Bustin references Paul Celan's neologisms, so that her artworks relate to words. She uses a ratio of 7cm high and 7cm length for each word, so that size of a work is pre-determined (long and thin).

## APPENDIX D

### Submission to *Unknown Quantities*, for publication in December 2016

I wrote a short text based on my research in Chapter 9 – Closeness, which was included in a publication titled *Unknown Quantities*, fourth edition, for circulation in bookshops and galleries. The publication collected together writing by different authors on the theme ‘intimacy’, and was a collaboration between students from the MA Culture, Criticism and Curation and MA Communication Design course at Central St Martins, University of the Arts London. Although I have not used endnotes in my thesis, they were used for referencing in the publication and reproduced here.

#### Closeness: Agnes Martin’s Methods of Art-making

Some of Agnes Martin’s delicate works were on view at Tate Modern, London in 2015 before travelling internationally (1). Their nuanced surfaces entice viewers to move closer. So light in touch and finely measured are the iterations of graphite, paint and ink that, as visitors leaned in to inspect the surfaces, alarms repeatedly sounded. Her ruled lines, which are never exact and which were preceded in her early work by wires pulled tight over wood, were lightly drawn in sections across wide canvases, creating slight tonal variations. Strokes of graphite and ink are fractionally uneven. Paint is not quite contained within the boundaries set down by the artist, adding to the sense that these paintings are not only the result of careful deliberation, but also inclined to the fragility of the hand-made. They are imperfect attempts toward perfection (2).

Recently, art historian and contemporary art writer Roger Cook recalled his impression when, in 1966, he saw one of Martin’s six feet square canvases; *The City*, a grid of blue lines on gesso. He wrote of being ‘drawn to the containing quietude’ of that painting, and described the time and space of viewing as an ‘intimate rendezvous’ between the painting and its beholder (3). To better understand the contemplative experience offered by Martin’s paintings, I have given my attention to her careful methods, enabling me to make similarly quiet artworks in a present-day context. This required my thoughtful inspection of her surfaces, as well as consideration of her meditative attitude toward art work.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Martin experimented with materials found close to her studio in a former shipbuilding area at Coenties Slip, New York. Like many other artists in that neighbourhood, she retrieved these from the demolition of buildings that cleared the way for high-rise buildings along Wall Street (4). Martin assembled constructions of wood, together with other found objects, and she transcribed into abstract form the landscapes seen in her early years: wheat fields around her childhood home in Saskatchewan, Canada, and the mountains and plains of New Mexico experienced in young adulthood. She also recalled lines of up-rooted trees and rows of planted crops on her uncle's farm (5). In their place, she set nail heads within pencilled grids, as in the twelve-inch square painting *Little Sister* (1962), with their points driven through the canvas surface. Between 1958 and 1959, objects were replaced by painted circles, surrounded by a ring of graphite to mimic the shadows (6).

At the Tate exhibition, my attention was held by one of her paintings titled *The Islands* (1961); a six feet square painting with a central grid containing touches of paint that resemble tufts of cotton pulled through a weave. There are thirty-two vertical columns with pairs of painted marks on a light brown surface the colour of unpainted linen. The cream-white dashes of oil paint do not fully extend across the pencilled grid, so that there is a mesh of empty pencil lines protruding around its outer edge. A wide margin surrounds the composition, enclosed within a thin cream-white painted line. My eye travelled to the area just within the canvas-edge, and was fixed by small dark puncture-like dots aligning the grid.

Through my own work, I responded to the elements that drew my attention in Martin's paintings, exploring the interior limits of a small composition framed within a larger piece. Stitched lines cut from book bindings sit alongside ruled graphite lines, pale colour is pencilled on old discoloured paper removed from discarded books, and impressions are made through the surfaces by a pencil or sharp pointed implement. The artworks are small in scale and available for others to hold. Layers of paper and card permit the viewer to look beneath flaps or open pages to reveal subtle detail beneath. I have retained the qualities that I have seen in Agnes Martin's tranquil surfaces, and sought to re-create the sense of intimacy between artwork and spectator that her paintings provide.

## Appendices

- (1) *Agnes Martin*, exhibition, Tate Modern, London, 3 June – 11 October 2015
- (2) See Agnes Martin, *On the Perfection Underlying Life*, in *Agnes Martin, Writings*, Schwarz, D. ed., Ostfildern: Cantz, 1991
- (3) *Doorknob in the Desert: Agnes Martin's Queer Becoming*, *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, vol.2, no.1, 2016:22
- (4) See Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line, Re-making Art after Modernism*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2004:48-51,
- (5) Agnes Martin, quoted in Ann Wilson, *Linear Webs: Agnes Martin*, *Art and Artists* vol.1, no.7, October 1966:46-49
- (6) Christina Bryan Rosenberger, *A Sophisticated Economy of Means, Agnes Martin's Materiality* in Cooke, L, K. Kelly and B. Schroder ed. *Agnes Martin*, New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011:108-109

## **APPENDIX E - A workshop methodology**

**1. The researcher must first define the focus of their study** - The researcher must carefully consider the purpose of their study, clearly stating the aims for their research. It can help to have guiding sentences as a means to sort information so that it is relevant to the study. Finding the focus for a study is not only something that happens prior to the research, but is also an ongoing process of sorting and editing.

**2. Artworks must be examined in detail at first hand** - Close inspection of artworks enables a researcher to give attention to the materials and methods used. Extended time with an artist's work can enable the researcher to observe details that would have been unavailable in images and to make connections between particular categories of work. Repeated viewing can be helpful, either alone, or with other people. Information can be recorded in simple diagrams, notes and photographs.

**3. A practical analysis is made by re-enacting elements observed in the earlier artworks** - A contextual review can be conducted in parallel with the practical analysis to inform ongoing practice and introduce new perspectives. The researcher can experiment in their own practice to make new work by first identifying elements in the subject of their study. New experimentation and surprising discoveries are recorded. A combined study can prompt new thinking about specific qualities, methods, materials and mark-making.

**4. Workshops: the presentation of artworks** - The selection of a 'family' of practice, people with a shared interest, enables more focused dialogue about particular aspects of practice. By encouraging people to scrutinize the new artworks at first-hand, there is the opportunity for them to closely examine and report on elements of mark, surface and materials. This can disseminate practical knowledge and responses can inform the ongoing development of practice. It is also helpful for the researcher to note when their expectations are not met. When workshops are set up alongside an exhibition, artists and art researchers are encouraged to test the methods presented and those seen in the exhibition by making new work during the session. A selection of materials can be provided, but participants can also add their own materials.